

# Drugs' Use in Mass Culture

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Drugs in mass culture are uncritical, positive, or neutral representations of drug use that can be encountered in mass cultural products and media. Such representations can be seen in films, music, literature, websites, commercially marketed everyday products such as food, clothing, cosmetics, and celebrities' statements and attitudes towards drugs, among others. Some studies suggest a causal relationship between the representation of drug use in mass culture content and the liberalization of attitudes towards psychoactive substances and the decision to use these substances by the recipients of such content.

mass culture

illegal drugs

alcohol

marijuana

youth

## Introduction

Mass culture is a specific form of symbolic culture, and an important feature of it is a characteristic message without direct contact between the sender and the receiver of the transmitted content. The carrier of mass culture are all means of mass communication (including cinema, television, radio, advertising, magazines), but first of all the content presented in them [1]. The popularity and dissemination of this type of messages are fostered by technological development, especially the availability of the Internet, which allows the diffusion of all ideas to an unlimited audience.

Authors of social studies indicate that the creations of contemporary mass culture may play an important role in the liberalization of attitudes towards psychoactive drugs, presenting drugs as a sanction-free element of social life, free of odium and almost unlimited [2, 3]. The normative changes taking place in the modern world concerning narcotics, including the creation of a positive image of them in numerous media, have been considered as one of the important reasons for the changes in attitudes towards psychoactive drugs observed today [4, 5, 6].

The cultivation theory developed by George Gerbner et al. emphasizes the important role of television as a medium that reaches the widest audience, which by presenting a given social phenomenon often enough creates its perception among viewers. Frequent reception of certain behaviors perpetuates (cultivates) in the viewers' consciousness their occurrence in the social space [7]. Adapting the assumptions of this theory to the study of reality related to the portrayal of drugs in the media, it can be assumed that frequent exposure of content depicting psychoactive drugs, especially in a casual or humorous emotional way, may contribute to the liberalization of attitudes towards these drugs.

The social learning theory of Albert Bandura [8] allows us to understand the modeling of attitudes of the actors of media messages on the recipients of these contents. According to the author of this theory, reaching for drugs is a consequence of the individual taking over the patterns of such behavior observed in significant people; patterns

acquired, modeled, and adopted by the individual as his/her own. The use of models is part of the process of social transmission of culture and is an essential element of social learning. An essential role in the process of social learning is played by observation, during which the frequency of observed behavioral patterns favors a stronger impact on the individual. Remembering the observed activities, reproducing them, and, as a result, adopting them as one's own represent the stages of the learning process. Rewarding effects for correct imitation of behaviors, which include acceptance in a group, promote memorization, and faithful reproduction of observed behaviors [6, 8]. Strong relationships with individuals who use psychoactive drugs significantly affect the imitation of this type of activity by individuals newly admitted to the community [9]. The tendency to act and behave similarly can be observed among the recipients of mass culture content, as well as the tendency to systematically become mass members of society who, imitating their idols, celebrities, and other people recognized as authorities, duplicate the observed behaviors [10].

Both the cultivation (perpetuation) of certain behaviors and the influence of people who are widely understood as authorities may be important factors promoting the spread of ideas liberalizing attitudes towards drugs.

### **Representations of drug use in mass culture**

For several decades now, mass culture productions have often featured positive messages about psychoactive drugs. One can read about drugs or experiences related to their use in newspapers and books. Film productions are being made that increasingly feature scenes of drug use. Musical works with this theme present the positions and experiences after drug use of youth idols. Representations of psychoactive drugs can be encountered while shopping, in grocery stores, clothing stores, drug stores, or gadget stores, as well as on city streets, especially on buildings decorated with colorful pro-drug graffiti [6]. Numerous Internet portals have also been observed disseminating views that may foster harmful or risky behaviors, including the promotion of violence and the use of psychoactive substances [11, 12, 13]. Examples of the influence of cultural texts on viewers' attitudes can be observed in various circumstances, e.g. listening to music containing messages about the use of psychoactive drugs can influence alcohol abuse, drug use, and aggressive behavior of viewers [14]. Scenes of drug use seen in films can distort the image of drug use [15], and studies suggest a causal relationship between viewing such films and replication of such behaviors by viewers of these messages [16, 17]. The following are observed examples of drug use in mass culture.

**Movies:** Drug use has been a theme in the film industry for decades. Film-makers often address both health-promoting and risky behaviors. Film productions with this theme began to appear as early as the fourth decade of the 20th century, but at that time they were more often about alcohol addiction and the relationships shown between alcoholics and their loved ones. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, many more films appeared in which drugs other than alcohol were used. Such scenes have also begun to form the main plot of screen adaptations [18]. Examples of films in which drug scenes appear frequently include *Trainspotting*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *Blue collar*, *Easy rider*, *Big Lebowski*, *Drugstore cowboy*, *Bad Lieutenant*, *Traffic*, *Blow*, *Leaving Las Vegas*, *Kids* [19, 20], and many other screen adaptations. The Internet Wikipedia has a "List of Drug Movies" page that provides an alphabetical listing of several hundred movies in which drug use is a major theme or that feature

scenes of drug use or distribution. The drugs most commonly shown in films are cocaine, heroin, marijuana, methamphetamine, and LSD [21].

In a study designed to estimate the representation of drug use in scenes from Oscar-nominated films between 2008 and 2011, the authors analyzed the media content of 47 films (nominated for Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Actress) depicting drug use and/or its consequences. The researchers identified a total of 515 scenes of drug use in these films. Both the use of alcohol, cigarettes, and illicit drugs were presented as problematic or occasional behavior, but usually as a reaction to stress and tension. In addition, an increase in scenes of drug use other than alcohol and tobacco, as well as scenes of simultaneous use of multiple drugs, including by women, was observed each year. According to the authors of the study, films with drug use episodes reflect what is happening in society; in Western countries more and more teenagers are experimenting with drugs, e.g. marijuana, while smoking tobacco is on the decline. Researchers also point out that Oscar-nominated films are the films with the highest viewership and may influence the creation of behaviors of viewers of this content [22].

Numerous productions feature bleak images depicting familial, relational, and social dysfunctions depicted in such films as *Requiem for a Dream*, considered a cult film of the genre. However, even in this dramatic film, which has been described as a "horror" film, scenes of drug use can imply a desire for a drug experience. Short sequences that vividly depict close-ups of drug packages being opened, preparation, drugs being ingested, distribution in the bloodstream, and pupils dilating after use can create an exciting need for the viewer to experience these states [23].

In April 2021, the third edition of the SPLIFF Film Festival was held online. According to the originators of this project: "SPLIFF is a place for filmmakers, artists, animators, and smokers to share original short films that explore and/or celebrate cannabis and its liberating effects on our imaginations, appetites, libido, and creative energy" [24].

**Music:** As early as the end of the 20th century, it was warned that adolescents' music preferences may correlate positively with engaging in risky behaviors, including drug use [25]. Analogous observations were reported by members of the Council on Communications and Media [26] at the end of the first decade of the new millennium. Attention was paid primarily to representations of drug use in the lyrics of contemporary popular music.

In 2005, a content analysis of nearly three hundred of the most popular songs (according to Billboard) was conducted to determine the frequency of drug-alcohol messages in the lyrics of selected music genres. The results indicated that in pop songs, 9% of the content of this type was observed, in rock songs - 14%, in hip-hop and R&B songs 20% of the content about taking intoxicants was marked, and the highest indications were obtained in rap lyrics containing 77% of such messages. The authors of the study indicated that music can be a cause of creating attitudes towards drugs. The measurement did not determine the impact of this type of content on the behavior of adolescents and focused solely on the analysis of the text layer [27].

Numerous studies have observed associations of certain music genres (rap, reggae, techno, R&B, punk, heavy metal, house, trance) with alcohol use [14, 28, 29, 30] and drug use - marijuana, amphetamine, ecstasy, LSD,

hallucinogenic mushrooms, heroin and GHB [14, 28, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35]. Studies have confirmed that the number of drug references in the lyrics of popular music in recent decades has increased many times, while drug use is most often associated in these messages with splendor, wealth, mood enhancement, sexual activity, celebration, and social life [36, 37, 38]. Researchers of relations between music and behavior emphasize that even compositions without references to extra-musical reality can provoke strong psychological reactions in listeners [39], whereas texts transmitted through music can promote the popularization of the messages they contain [35]. The content heard can be absorbed and then adopted and brought into the listener's life as their own [40].

**Books, specialty magazines, and publications:** Publications published in the form of books are also an example of promoting a culture of drug use and encouraging such activity. However, exemplifying the dissemination of content infused with positive information and messages about psychoactive drug use are specialized magazines and publications aimed at those interested in psychoactive experiences, either published by online sites or available in a hard copy [6].

The online platform Feedspot.com updated in early April 2021 provides a ranking of 30 magazines that publish cannabis-related content intending to discuss cannabis news, companies, stocks, and technological advances, presenting the latest industry news, legal and financial information, business opportunities, and cannabis compliance, among other topics. These publications also provide information on how to grow cannabis, strategies for growers and finished product distribution business owners, current market data, and more [41, 42].

**Celebrities:** The glorification of drug use by celebrities and the prevalence of such behaviors suggested by the representatives of this group are other factors that may contribute to the liberalization of attitudes towards drugs [43]. Representatives of this group strongly influence the health behaviors of their admirers, often making them followers of their preferred activities [44]. Projects have been undertaken in which researchers attempt to determine the impact of media coverage of idol drug use on adolescent behavior [45]. However, determining these relationships may not always be accurate, as they may depend on the context in which the information is conveyed; for example, reports of Amy Winehouse and Prince's drug-related deaths may tend to negatively influence perceptions of drug use [45, 46].

Research suggests that watching scenes in which actors, especially celebrities, use tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs or discuss their use may influence viewers' beliefs and behaviors regarding the use of these drugs. A study conducted among adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15 found that cigarette smoking by movie stars may play an important role in encouraging adolescents, especially girls, to replicate this behavior [47].

Studies conducted among adolescents confirmed that adolescents, despite being aware of some pathological behaviors of their idols, unreflectively copy the activities observed in them. Along with the indifference and departure from previous authorities noticeable among adolescents, this phenomenon constitutes a considerable threat and challenge for parents, teachers, as well as individuals or groups that may exert influence on the representatives of this age group. Celebrities' admitting to using psychoactive substances may model the patterns of such activity among young people. For young people, idols are almost objects of worship, and at the same time,

they are sometimes mistakenly perceived as authorities. Unfortunately, they are often people who despise social norms and have many problems, for whom the use of drugs is the norm, which they do not intend to hide [6].

**Internet:** Many researchers emphasize the important role of social networks in the exchange of information between drug users. Currently, there are a considerable number of videos on the Internet, including YouTube, showing drug-related behavior [48]. There are also portals created for everyone interested in drug use, such as Erowid, Bluelight [49], HipForums [50], Hyperreal, and Neurogroove [6]. In addition, popular social networking sites, e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram are often platforms for sharing drug experiences [51, 52].

On these portals, it is possible to obtain all the information necessary to produce homemade drugs with strong narcotic potential produced from poppy seeds, drugs purchased over-the-counter (OTC) combined with components available in every household, and information on all ways to achieve intoxicated states [53, 54]. Knowledge on these topics can be obtained without any obstacles. As Paul M. Wax points out, it only takes one click to both, get the information you are looking for on drug use, manufacturing, "safe" use, and purchase the goods you are looking for via the Internet [55].

The Internet influences both drug distribution and drug use; it facilitates the emergence of new producers and distributors in the global drug market while providing these actors with new customers and fostering increased demand for drugs [56].

Already in 2013, the EMCDDA identified 651 online sites offering new drugs, while in 2014, the observation of emerging online offers confirmed the activity of portals offering other drugs for trade, previously available only on the so-called black market [57]. Acquisition of drugs is very simple; after placing an order, a shipment is delivered to the indicated address within a few days, for which payment can be made only upon delivery. Standard shipments are often enhanced by traffickers with free samples of new drugs. Attractive distribution and clear conditions set by online sellers create the appearance of legality, encouraging the use of the offered products [6]. In addition, quasi-pharmacies operate on the Web, where potent narcotic medications can be easily purchased without a prescription [58]. In addition, for more than a decade, an indeterminate number of stores offering NSP and other drugs for sale has been operating on the Internet [59, 60]. Internet surveys conducted among NSP users confirm that Internet forums are the main source of information about new drugs. Individuals who go to treatment facilities after drug intoxication admit that they have used information provided, among others, on the Hyperreal website [6]. In addition, knowledge about NSP can be obtained from online stores, dealers, friends, and the media. Other studies have also found that the primary reason for using NSP was to come across positive accounts of drug use on websites [61]. Organized drug trafficking via social media, including Instagram and Facebook, the advertising of drugs through these media, and the downplaying of the risks associated with their use is a problem systematically observed by law enforcement and public health agencies [62, 63].

**Food:** For over a decade, the food market has seen products infused with cannabinoids present, including tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). These products come in various forms such as baked goods, candy, or beverages. Countries, where cannabis use has been legalized, have taken the necessary regulatory steps to reduce the risk of

intoxication by requiring edible products to have universal warning symbols, informing consumers of the proper serving size; limiting the amount of THC per serving and the total number of servings per item [64]. However, outside of countries where the use of cannabis derivatives has been legalized, products labeled with the cannabis leaf can be purchased in regular grocery stores to attract the attention of those interested in using the drug [6]. Food products containing hemp derivatives are sometimes referred to as "superfoods" Food products containing cannabis derivatives are sometimes referred to as "superfoods" [65], and manufacturers encourage purchase and consumption by creating new trends that can be assimilated by adolescents. The observation of consumer behavior of adolescents confirms the high popularity of this type of food products [66].

**Clothing, jewelry, gadgets, cosmetics:** In recent decades, dynamic development of the clothing industry can be observed, which targets its products to specific groups of consumers, including users of psychoactive drugs. It should be noted that studies on worn clothing as a stimulus to undertake specific behaviors, as well as clothing as self-expression and identification with a particular social group, confirm the presence of dependencies and links between these variables [67]. Clothing manufacturers offer a variety of models of shirts, pants, caps, sweatshirts, coats, socks, and other garments, full of both pop culture references and, of course, full of weed leaf prints containing messages glorifying the use of cannabis derivatives. Observers of this phenomenon believe that this is a developing trend and unstoppable [68, 69]. Brands are being created, whose activity is directed towards the production of both clothing and all gadgets related to the use of cannabis: decorative boxes, pipes, blotters, grinders, and other smoking utensils [70, 71, 72]. In addition, entire series of drug-related jewelry collections are being created, where the offered earrings, rings, necklaces, bracelets, and other intricately crafted pretzels are shaped like cannabis leaves, other drugs [68, 73], or necklace pendants shaped like molecular structures of cocaine, methamphetamine, LSD, and other drugs [74]. Cosmetics drugstores are increasingly selling products decorated with a cannabis leaf. Although they do not contain psychoactive substances in their composition, due to the social discourse related to the controversy over the legalization of marijuana, these products are also popular among consumers [75, 76].

### **Research data suggesting a causal relationship between reception of liberal drug content and attitudes toward and use of drugs**

Mass media can both promote a pro-health culture and foster anti-health activities [77]. Several studies suggest that adolescents' risky behaviors are associated with exposure to drug-liberal mass culture content portrayed in film, music, literature, and via websites, among others.

In a study by Dal Cin et al., it was found that viewing frequent smoking scenes may lead to nicotine initiation and this behavior may then continue and be conditioned by other factors, in particular the immediate social context of smoking (e.g. growing up/being among smokers) and consequently nicotine dependence [78]. In a study that examined the influence of media-observed scenes of psychoactive drug use on the use of such specifics, a relationship between these variables was established: respondents admitted that viewing mass media content with drug messages influenced their decision to reach for these drugs [79]. When analyzing the opioid abuse posts available on Instagram, researchers observed that codeine misuse becomes commercialized and ritualized.

Furthermore, these posts both instruct and normalize the abuse of this type of medication, while linking codeine use to pop culture icons (the Simpsons, Mickey Mouse, or Pokemons) in posts by appealing to humor messages about the dangers. At the same time, a frequent topic of Instagram discussions was combining codeine with marijuana, alcohol, and benzodiazepines, which significantly increases the risk of consequences, including overdose mortality, especially among adolescents [52]. A 2011 study of U.S. adolescents found that adolescents who regularly spend time on social networking sites are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, including smoking, alcohol use, and marijuana use. Researchers have attributed an important role to social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, and others, where adolescents browse photos of other users of such sites while using psychoactive substances or view content illustrating states experienced after drug use on such sites [80]. In the studies conducted among Polish adolescents (n=2273) statistically significant associations were established between listening to music, watching films, and browsing websites with liberal drug messages on attitudes towards drugs and increased indications of use reported by the respondents [6].

## Summary

The cited survey data correspond with the cultivation theory of Gerbner and L. Gross [81], and the results of this research suggest that the behavioral patterns shown in the media are perpetuated and nurtured, and carried forward in the actions of the audience in the social space in which they function, learn, work, play, and live. The observed connections between the use of popular culture products and drug use correspond to the features of social reality defined by the postmodern perspective: ambivalence, complete tolerance of all ideas, pluralism, liberalization, the aftermath of "modernity" defined by J. Baudrillard as "the state after the orgy". - The emergence of liberation in all possible spheres of social reality, including political liberation, sexual liberation, the liberation of women, children, unconscious drives, destructive powers, productive forces, and at the same time the affirmation of all models of representation and anti-representation [82]. The above data suggest an important role of popular culture products in creating liberal, pro-drug positions. However, to more accurately establish statistically significant relationships, well-designed empirical studies should be conducted.

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