

Issue: 19, 2011

Youth and Risky Consumption: Moving Toward a Transformative Approach

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ABSTRACT

Recent statistics indicate that youth continue to engage in a wide variety of risky behaviours in spite of significant investment devoted to improving their well-being. One possible factor is a paternalistic view in understanding risk and promoting well-being. Participants in the Youth and Risk track of the Transformative Consumer Research conference challenge the paternalistic view, arguing in this paper for a more inclusive perspective that requires a re-examination of the nature of risk. The paternalistic view is discussed, and then countered with a more participatory approach that develops a role for youth in research in order to achieve socially desirable outcomes.

ARTICLE

*We don't need no education
We don't need no thought control...
All in all it's just another brick in the wall.
All in all you're just another brick in the wall.
from "Brick in the Wall" by Pink Floyd*

Thousands of scholars and billions of dollars have been devoted to improving youth well-being by reducing the incidence of risky behaviours. Yet recent statistics suggest that much work remains. In the U.S., statistics show that 20% of 8th graders had experimented with cigarettes, more than 1000 infants are born to 15-19 year-olds every day, about half of 12th graders have tried an illicit drug, and more than 6% of 12th graders report daily use of marijuana (Hamilton, Martin and Ventura 2010; Johnston et al. 2010). Moreover, rates of

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harmful behaviours such as prescription drug abuse by teens and childhood obesity are on the rise (CADCA 2008; Ogden and Carroll 2010). Although the rates of risky behaviours vary from country to country, similar concerns about the adverse consequences of risky behaviours on youth well-being are shared around the globe. Even subtle threats, such as failing to make sound financial decisions that will negatively influence life later, are forming before and during adolescence. Given the prevalence and seriousness of such behaviour, important questions surround how teens perceive the risks associated with these behaviours as well as society's efforts to influence their actions.

For decades, consumer researchers, social marketers, and policy scholars have been concerned about deterring youth from engaging in risky behaviours (Andreasen 2006). Risky behaviours adopted as youth have longer-term consequences and can have more profound effects than when engaged in later. For example, teen pregnancy can inhibit educational attainment, thereby compounding the consequences of the pregnancy and future opportunities. Similarly, early sexual activity increases both the probability of contracting an STD due to higher rates of exposure. Because consequences can be more serious for risky behaviour when engaged by youth, researchers continue to consider youth risky consumption as being worthy of special attention.

Typically marketing scholars and practitioners have approached youth risky consumption in one of two ways. Following a social marketing perspective, researchers focus on educating individuals about risky behaviours and marketing positive lifestyle options so that individuals personally make better choices (Kotler and Lee 2008). A second upstream approach has focused on highlighting marketing's role in creating the opportunities, environmental norms, and attraction surrounding risky products such as tobacco, alcohol, and gambling, and then advocating for environmental change (e.g., bans on tobacco advertising toward youth, raising the legal age to purchase alcohol) (Andreasen 2006). With both approaches, the identification of risk and its resolution tend to be constructed based on an adult prioritization, with limited input from youth, of the risks that exist within today's teen culture. Despite the research and societal efforts, risky consumption among youth remains a major societal concern - one that is worthy of new understanding and approach.

Participants in the Youth and Risk Track at the 2011 Transformative Consumer Research Conference challenged the traditional views commonly used to recognize and deter risky consumption by youth. We argue that the defining of risky behaviours and subsequent risk reduction attempts remain driven by social marketing and policy efforts firmly rooted in an adult-driven paternalistic paradigm, too often devoid of the youth voice. Then, we advocate for a more inclusive perspective to identify and understand risk behaviours. We do this in the following by 1) discussing the nature of a paternalistic approach, 2) identifying some underlying assumptions about teens and risk-taking embedded in such an approach, and 3) highlighting some key research areas in which a youth perspective can provide unique insights into the interpretation and negotiation of risk.

Risk Identification and Reduction Entrenched in a Paternalistic Perspective

Risk reduction efforts and policy have been shaped by a paradigm in which adult experts primarily identify and define risk in youths' lives. Guided by statistics and incidence rates, a discovery stage occurs in which adult authorities identify the behaviours associated with adverse health or societal outcomes (Andreasen 2006). These adverse outcomes may be linked to serious outcomes in the immediate present (e.g., teen deaths from drug use, teen accidents from drinking) or long-term consequences throughout the lifespan (e.g., adult deaths from lung cancer, adult alcoholism rates). Once identified as problematic, these behaviours are defined as risky for all youth and more acceptable, safer youth lifestyles are promoted and regulated. While this process is important for the discovery of harmful social

patterns, it is heavily entrenched in a paternalistic paradigm that may limit its relevance and impact within today's youth subculture.

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Paternalism is the interference of a state or an individual with another person, against their will, and defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm." In short, when individuals are forced to act (or are prevented from acting) in specific ways through laws, policies, or others decision making on their behalf despite the person not consenting or preferring to be treated in such a way, then paternalism is at play. While paternalism has been questioned in risk and health contexts (e.g., mandatory seat belt and helmet laws, anti-drug and anti-smoking policies), such an approach is commonly considered justified when the persons are seen as not fully rational nor capable of understanding the consequences of their actions. Thus, much public policy tends to be embedded with a paternalistic view toward youth and risk intervention.

Scholars have argued that youth are an important at-risk group prone to poor choices and in need of protection (Andreasen et al. 2012; Pechmann et al. 2011). Adult-like cognitive skills (e.g., advanced processing, impulse control) are not fully developed until about age 24, when the prefrontal cortex is fully shaped. Consumer research suggests that information processing deficits and limited inhibitory control of youth due to incomplete cognitive development can lead to increased sensation-seeking and risk behaviours (Moses and Baldwin 2005; Pechmann et al. 2005). In addition, the social transition during adolescence may further contribute to maladaptive behaviours. During this time youth often face self-esteem concerns, desire peer conformity despite costs, attempt different identity roles, and are open to new normative (potentially maladaptive) behaviours (Steinberg 2008). Pechmann and colleagues (2005) review of the neuroscience, psychology and marketing literatures argued that the combination of impulsivity and self-consciousness may make teens particularly vulnerable to marketing and risky behaviour. Youth experience emotional swings and hormonal shifts that may heighten self-esteem concerns and sensation-seeking impulsivity, while lacking the confident identity or socialization skills to navigate difficult situations with risk behaviours (Pechmann et al 2005). Given this view of youth's cognitive, emotional, and social development, it is no wonder that adolescents are positioned as 'at risk' and a paternalistic orientation guides social marketing and policies. Table 1 represents this paternalistic perspective of youth and their environment, and its contrast with an adult ideal.

Table 1: Examples of a Paternalistic View of Adults, Youth, and Youth Environment

View of Adults/Society	View of Adolescents	View of Youth Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete, mature; capable decision maker and consumer • Full cognitive development; impulse control • Emotionally and socially mature • Future orientation, recognize long term consequences to actions • Identity developed, wisdom from life experience • Capable of identifying risk factors and youth's best interests • Protective compassion drives risk reduction efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incomplete "adult-to-be"; in need of protection • Cognitive development in progress; impulsivity • Emotionally and socially underdeveloped • Present-orientation, not recognize long term consequences to actions • Identity and self-esteem in question and flux • Lack life experience and social coping skills • React to authority and attempts to curtail actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Filled with tempting risk (or forbidden adult) behaviours that require education and prevention • Peer pressures and conformity concerns prompt risk-taking • Media/marketing promote mature (often risky) lifestyles • <i>All</i> (any) engagement in risk behaviour is negative

Past research has led to a useful understanding of adolescent vulnerabilities, but within the marketplace, a youth-driven view of risk has not been incorporated. Drawing on sociological and critical youth studies, the authors challenge this “underdeveloped” view of youth and that adolescence is a stage characterized by shortcomings and risks. Some youth scholars have argued that an over-reliance upon developmental psychology and its discrete cognitive, emotional, and social development stages has focused our view of youth toward deficiency and being ‘at risk’ (Best 2007; Lesko 2001, 1997; Raby 2007). A more youth-driven perspective recognizes the competencies of youth and their reflexive, active participation in society while viewing them “...not as subjects-in-the-making but as subjects in their own right” (Best 2007, p.11). We argue that a re-conceptualization of adolescence is needed – one that recognizes youth not as a temporary, transitional stage through a lens of adults-to-be, but as an important period and cultural location with its own unique complexities and opportunities.

A Participatory, Youth-Involved Perspective –Value and Research Focus

Adolescence can be viewed as a time of exploration and emergence that is characterized by self-discovery, growing autonomy, testing boundaries, and an increased focus on peer involvement and intimacy. Today’s youth are recognized as a distinct subculture from adults with their own behaviours, beliefs, norms, cultural meanings, and controls for access into their world. Indeed adolescence may involve risk-taking behaviours, but this is likely to be manifested in ways and embedded with meanings not readily understood by adults (Lightfoot 1997). However, most public policy and social marketing efforts fail to incorporate this complex youth perspective. As a result, many risk prevention and cessation campaigns may not have the intended results, or may even lead to undesirable effects (Pechmann and Slater 2005; Ringold 2002). Efforts to curtail risk behaviour by authority figures or social marketing messages may be met with misunderstanding and reactance. Thus, we believe a more participatory youth-centred perspective is needed which can help illuminate youth culture, the meaning of youth actions, their interpretations of risk, and tap into the transformative power that lies within adolescence.

The prevalent ‘adult view’ on risk (shared by many health professionals, policy makers, and parents) is that targeted consumption practices (smoking, substance use/abuse, unprotected sex, etc) are all risky. Yet, many young people engage in these practices as part of their everyday lives (Plant and Plant 2003). As such, a central disparity exists in the perceptions of risk and vulnerability, which raise new questions about the extent to which adolescent’s views on risky behaviour and vulnerability differ from adult views. Arguably, the closure of this gap is essential to the development of more impactful, youth-relevant approaches to identifying and reducing risk behaviours. Furthermore, a change in perspective, from paternalistic to participatory partner, raises a number of questions that require research attention. A summary of a few important questions appears in Table 2, and is discussed next to illustrate how a youth perspective might alter the nature of research into teen risk and consumption.

Table 2: Research Questions related to A Participatory Youth Perspective

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do teens identify and evaluate risk? • How do teens negotiate various risks in their everyday lives? • How does identity construction and experimentation impact teens’ risk behaviour negotiation? • How do the complexities of modern life and growing importance of peers impact teens’ risk identification and negotiation? • How might a competent, empowered lens of youth impact risk research and reduction practices? |
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Previous research focuses on one of the big four threats to teen health: smoking, substance use, obesity, and sexual health (pregnancy and sexually-transmitted infections (STIs)). Yet, little work has been done to understand how teens balance risk from multiple sources simultaneously as well as balance the benefits and adverse aspects of risk behaviour. Risky consumption practices can be a source of cultural capital providing symbolic capital, status, and social esteem within their social worlds (Quintero and Davis 2002). For example, Fletcher et. al (2009) describe how marijuana use may be an important aspect of urban youths' lives in that it expresses street identity, leads to peer-group bonding, protects from bullying and victimization, and helps avoid other stigmatized categories like crackhead or addict. Such studies suggest that teens do recognize and balance threats, but little research has been completed that examines the nature of these risk perceptions and the processes by which such risks are negotiated.

Similarly, assumptions are often made that the choice to engage in a risky behaviour is either/or. However the choice may not be as simple as 'either smoke and be accepted or don't smoke and be ostracized.' From the teen's perspective, what may be more likely is an ongoing identity development process embedded with negotiating risk that involves assessment of the situation, the environment, the actors, and behaviour choices. Adolescence is characterized by a period in which individuals define their identities through group associations and symbolic consumption practices. Risky consumption behaviours are central to the formation of young people's social identities (Griffin et al. 2009; Roche et al. 2006; Wilson 2005). For example, Quintero and Davis (2002) view smoking as a consumption practice that 'generates symbolic capital and social position within adolescent cliques and crowds' (p. 453). Haines et al. (2009) provide empirical evidence for the differentiated meanings of tobacco use based on personal/parental indicators of cultural capital. For young people from relatively advantaged family contexts, smoking can be a way of expressing social distinction and self-control. For more privileged youths, being an occasional smoker enables their enactment of anti-establishment feelings, while distancing themselves from the stigmatized identity categories of the regular or addicted smoker (Scheffels and Lund 2005). The construction of an identity may constrain choice such that a risk avoidance behaviour choice is not viewed as such, but rather as a threat to identity. In other words, the choice is not about health but about laying a claim to one's self and social identity. Thus, from the teen's perspective, negotiating risks may be far more complicated than "Just say no." More research is needed to ascertain how teens negotiate risk when it is embedded with identity construction.

Much research has noted the influence of peers and of parents on risk behaviours (e.g., Moore et al. 2002) and yet little research has examined the nature of peer influence beyond either studies of the degree of influence or evaluations of peer educator programs (Ashcroft 2008; Moore et al. 2002). In research, teens have described peer influence related to risk-taking not as pressures but as social positioning which they actively construct (Lightfoot 1997). Young people's risky consumption experiences are embedded in interpersonal relationships (e.g., family, friends, teachers, neighbours). Peer groups serve as the primary social arena in which young people develop a sense of identity, experiment with various social identities, and make decisions about their present and future lives. Family members play a key role as well (Epp and Price 2008); however, one of the primary tensions in adolescence is the separation-individuation process in which adolescents begin to break away from their parents to create their own identity (Steinberg 1998). What is needed is an understanding of how teens evaluate peers and the meanings of risk behaviour shared between peers during this stage. Intuitively, one might expect that some teens have more influence over others, and that, like most social networks, influence may be specific to a sphere of expertise for some peers but broad across spheres for other peers. Further, individual factors are likely to influence resistance to or acceptance of peer pressure (e.g. Bamanca and Umana-Taylor 2006). Additional research is needed to better understand the dynamic interplay of such networks and individual factors in the context of risk negotiation.

Finally, while the perspective of youth as deficient in their cognitive development, impulsive control, and ability to resist peers or marketing pressures have provided valuable insights to risk research, it has also limited our view. This focus has contributed to a protective, paternalistic stance, while the strengths of youth and positive teen lifestyles have been understudied. A more youth-involved perspective would recognize the individual competencies and collective power of youth during this important stage. Given a more empowered view, research could emphasize the positive aspects of youth such as competencies, community involvement, constructive peer modelling, subculture negotiations, and resiliency, as well as integrate youth involvement into the processes and methods (e.g., participatory action methods, Ozanne and Saatcioglu 2008) which shape risk reduction efforts. Such a lens not only provides valuable insights for understanding teen risk identification and negotiation, but can also highlight youth's recognition of resilient actions and development of personal life competence under diverse life circumstances.

Conclusion

Social marketing and policy efforts have made progress on some risk behaviours, and particularly for some segments of the youth population. Despite emerging research insights, policy and social marketing remain largely set in a paternalistic perspective of adult experts defining behaviours that are appropriate for youth and attempting to promote and regulate compliance. We argue that the youth voice, rich with cultural interpretations and negotiations, must be valued, heard, and incorporated into social marketing research and policy development.

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