

# Advertising Psychoactive Substances: Targeting the Youth

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## Introduction

Psychoactive substances have been distributed for centuries, but advertising these substances is a relatively new phenomenon. While marketing is an effective way to increase profit margins, advertising substances like nicotine, alcohol, and caffeine, may be harmful—specifically to minors. According to the National Cancer Institute, psychoactive substances, also referred to as psychotropic substances, can be defined as “A drug or other substance that affects how the brain works and causes changes in mood, awareness, thoughts, feelings, or behavior” (NCI, 2015). In the past few decades, many large companies have realized that younger generations play a vital role in their profits and so these companies have begun targeting adolescence through their marketing techniques, creating an ethical debate. Sandra Calvert, a professor at Georgetown University, stated that “Children view approximately 40,000 advertisements per year” (Calvert, 2008, p. 206). Due to the human brain not being fully developed until a person’s late twenties, juveniles are more gullible to buy products or substances they see in advertisements, even if they are detrimental to one’s health. Many younglings only see what the advertisements want them to: positive alterations in mood or perception from ingesting nicotine, alcohol, or caffeine, but not the mental and psychological health problems, poor peer relationships, or academic difficulties these substances can cause.

## Nicotine

Nicotine, a component of tobacco and e-cigarettes, is a damaging and addictive substance being advertised to minors for companies’ economic gain. Linda Pucci and Michael Siegel, both researchers at Boston University, explained that cigarette marketing is one of the main causes of smoking initiation among minors (1999). The substance can be extremely dangerous because of how addictive it is. Nicotine advertising is problematic because it influences minors to start smoking and the continuation of smoking can lead to long-term health problems. Lucy Henke, a professor at the University of Louisiana, detailed, “The issue of JAMA contained three studies examining the impact of Joe Camel and other cigarette brand advertising on children from three to seventeen years of age. The studies collectively formed an indictment of cigarette advertising and individually concluded that cigarette advertising may be

an important health risk for children” (1995, p. 13). This means mental and physical health risks are put forward because advertisements make adolescents more interested in and familiar with psychoactive substances like nicotine through various marketing tactics, similar to what was explained by Pucci and Siegel. For example, many advertisements use social tactics to appeal to minors. Various advertisements for psychoactive substances display a lifestyle filled with wealth and beauty, which is attractive to most young adults, and through association with ideal lifestyles, the brand promotes itself. Camel, a known cigarette brand, is a prime illustration of the ethical debate. Their campaigns consist of sales promotion and print advertising that appeal to young people through a cartoon animal, Joe Camel (Pucci & Siegel, 1999). By giving away shirts and lighters or printing in magazines, minors become more interested in the product and want to try it. The problem continues with new versions of nicotine appearing. Juul, a major e-cigarette brand, uses controversial marketing techniques. Owen Dyer, a journalist in the *British Medical Journal*, specified that “The suspension of Philip Morris’ campaign came as another e-cigarette company, Juul, was targeted in a lawsuit by the US state of North Carolina over marketing and products that the state claims are aimed at young people” (Dyer, 2019, p. 365). The company is known for producing colorful and flavorful products to target a young audience. From 2018 to 2019, “the use of e-cigarettes increased by 78% among high schoolers and 48% among middle schoolers”, and Juul played a predominant role in the vaping epidemic among the youth (Dyer, 2019, p. 365).

## Alcohol

Alcohol is another psychoactive substance companies are persuading minors to purchase through their marketing tactics. The liquid can have numerous effects when ingested including alterations in decision-making, memory issues, health-related problems, and more. The consumption of alcohol contributes to the three leading causes of death in people ages 12 to 20 (unintentional injury, homicide, and suicide) and is associated with various health risk behaviors in this age group (CDC, 2013). As a consequence of alcohol being a socially acceptable and legal drug, many children believe it is okay to ingest this psychoactive substance. Businesses use this misconception to their advantage, marketing to minors through display, video, and mobile advertising. The average child views “75,000 drinking scenes on television before reaching the legal drinking age” and many of these commercials feature popular celebrities or wanted lifestyles (Roth & Friedman, 1987, p. 121). The social appeal leads minors to begin drinking at a very young age. David Jernigan, a professor at Boston University, wrote along with his colleagues explaining that “In analyzing magazine advertising for alcoholic beverages in 2003, CAMY found that young people aged 12-20 were exposed per capita to 48% more beer ads, 20% more distilled spirits ads, 92% more ads for “alcopops” and

alcoholic lemonades such as Bacardi Silver and Smirnoff Ice” (Jernigan et al., 2005, p. 315). Companies advertise alcohol through television, motion pictures, and magazines to show a sign of maturity, sociability, and autonomy to adolescents (Roth & Friedman, 1987). In other words, through particular marketing tactics, teens feel the need or desire to fit in through drinking. Corporations advertising alcohol also have been heavily criticized for the use of animated characters that appeal to younger children (Kelly et al., 2000). Parents specifically are worried that advertisements will motivate teens and children to ingest psychoactive substances, which scientists prove can be detrimental to their mental and physical health.

### Caffeine

Caffeine, the most widely consumed psychoactive substance, is constantly being advertised to the youth. It is the only psychotropic drug legally available to children and is generally recognized as safe, but it is an addictive substance that can have many health-related repercussions (Oddy & Sullivan, 2010). The negative effects are widely unknown to minors so many ingest caffeine without knowing the risks. The American Academy of Pediatrics specified that energy drinks should not be placed in a child’s diet due to their stimulant content (Pomeranz et al., 2013). They raise additional concerns about caffeine’s effects on evolving neurological and cardiovascular systems (Pomeranz et al., 2013). It is evident that caffeine can be damaging to minors’ physical health, reinstating what Oddy and Sullivan identified. Marketing the psychoactive substance promotes the initiation and continuation of the ingestion of caffeine, which could lead to caffeine toxicity among other consequences. Jennifer Pomeranz, a professor at NYU, wrote beside her two colleagues that “In 2007, there were 5,448 caffeine overdoses reported in the United States and a striking 46 percent of them occurred in persons younger than 19 years of age” (Pomeranz et al., 2013, p. 256). Similar to other psychoactive drugs, a person can overdose on caffeine, but the negative effects being unfamiliar to most of the public leads marketing companies to be able to advertise to children and teens without major repercussions. Although the companies’ financial intake may increase through advertising, there are many harmful effects that caffeine can have that are ignored by the public and marketing companies.

### Conclusion

As companies advertise psychoactive substances, the younger generations continue to be targeted through different marketing strategies. The controversy around the issue remains- whether or not companies should continue advertising these substances due to the ethical principles regarding the subject and targeted minors. Although many corporations benefit economically from advertising their products, other parties believe the extent to which advertisements target adolescence goes against moral

principles. Experts illustrate that psychotropic substances like nicotine, alcohol, and caffeine are harmful to youngsters, and many worry that advertisements will influence juveniles to ingest these substances and unknowingly harm themselves. In the final analysis, businesses selling psychoactive substances are profiting at the expense of the youth.

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