

ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Andrew Sigourney Holtz for the Master of Public Health in Health Education and Health Promotion presented July 25, 2002.

Title: Consider the Source: Youth Perceptions of Industry vs. Tobacco Control Groups Antismoking Television Ads.

Each day in the United States more than 3,000 adolescents younger than 18 become daily cigarette smokers. Smoking prevention programs usually include television advertisements. While most programs are run by governmental agencies or foundations, in 1998 the Philip Morris USA tobacco company unveiled its “Think. Don’t Smoke” campaign. It is important to identify the viewer perceptions of antismoking ads created by different sponsors.

This study used an anonymous internet-based survey of a convenience sample of 11- to 14-year-old youth in Portland, Oregon who viewed digitized samples of antismoking ads. The research objectives were to: 1) compare perceptions of Philip Morris ads to those of ads from tobacco control groups along four parameters: emotional strength, consequences of smoking, smoking as “forbidden fruit,” and whether the ad placed responsibility on individuals or the tobacco industry, 2) compare subgroups, with attention to smoking risk, and 3) explore web-based survey methods.

Students at three Portland Public School district middle schools provided 151 data sets, each containing responses to a video linked to demographic and smoking risk data. Compared to district data, respondents were more likely to be girls, ethnic minority group members, or to receive meal subsidies.

Viewers were more likely to perceive a message of individual responsibility in the Philip Morris company ads than in ads from tobacco control groups. Nine of ten responses said Philip Morris ads placed all or most of the responsibility for smoking decisions on individuals, with less than 4 percent holding tobacco companies responsible. The corresponding results for tobacco control groups ads were 71 percent individual responsibility and almost 15 percent industry responsibility ($p < .05$). Unlike previously reported comparisons, the differences along other measured parameters were not statistically significant. Students who are at higher risk for smoking rated ads less favorably than did lower-risk students. While the project confirmed the workability and the data-processing advantages of a web-based survey, it also demonstrated that student recruitment cannot be automated. This survey illustrates that the differing perspectives held by ad producers about the causes and circumstances of youth smoking are communicated through the ads and perceived by middle school students.