

Netflix in hot water for 'glamourising' tobacco use

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Streaming services aren't beholden to the same restrictions as broadcast television - the result is often more sex, more violence and more cursing. Picture: AP Photo/Elise Amendola, File

Washington - Streaming services aren't beholden to the same content restrictions as broadcast television. The result, to some viewers' chagrin and others' delight, is often more sex, more violence and more cursing.

And, it turns out, among the vices often embraced by streaming services and avoided by broadcast television is tobacco in all in its forms - which Netflix is being called out for.

The Truth Initiative - the non-profit anti-tobacco organisation - released a study that compared seven popular Netflix shows to seven popular broadcast shows. In this sample it found Netflix's shows featured characters smoking almost three times as often as those produced by broadcast networks like NBC, ABC and CBS.

The organisation behind the study argues this could lead teenagers and young adults to smoke.

"There has been a revolution in television that now encompasses a complex universe including Hulu, Netflix and an emerging world of on-demand platforms," Robin Koval, Truth Initiative CEO, said in a news release. "And while everybody was watching, but no one was paying attention, we've experienced a pervasive re-emergence of smoking imagery that is glamourising and renormalising a deadly habit to millions of impressionable young people."

"It has to stop," added Koval.

Netflix has not specifically addressed the study's findings.

"While streaming entertainment is more popular than ever, we're glad that smoking is not. We're interested to find out more about the study," a Netflix spokesperson told Variety.

The biggest offender, according to Truth, was "Stranger Things," the 1980s horror throwback that unexpectedly became one of the network's biggest hits to date. The show contained 182 scenes featuring tobacco or tobacco usage.

Once upon a time, scenes like this were the norm both on the silver and the small screen. In Hollywood's golden age of the 1940s and 1950s, cigarettes were as much a part of movies as opening credits. Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Cary Grant, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe - to name a few - rarely filmed a scene without a cigarette coolly dangling from their famous mouths.

That wasn't entirely coincidence. The tobacco industry often used movies as a vehicle to advertise cigarettes. In one infamous deal, Sylvester Stallone was paid \$500 000 to feature Brown & Williamson cigarettes in five of his movies, including "Rambo" and "Rocky IV," according to the New York Times.

When the Motion Picture Association of America's ratings system was introduced in 1968, it didn't account for tobacco usage by adults. As a result, G- and PG-rated movies often featured smoking.

That changed in 2007, when - under pressure from antismoking groups such as the Truth Initiative and the Harvard School of Public Health - the MPAA added smoking as a factor in assigning film ratings, alongside sex, violence, and swearing.

The change largely reflected society's own feelings on smoking, which is an increasingly uncommon activity - only 15 percent of American adults smoke in 2016, down from 20 percent in 2005, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Given that, some of Hollywood creators have steered away from including tobacco usage in their productions.

"I would not have any protagonist smoke in a movie unless it was a period film," Daniel Melnick, who produced "Blue Streak" and "Air America," among others, told the New York Times. "Audiences want the ability to idealise themselves in the stars."

The change was generally regarded as positive, since there is a connection between real-world and on-screen smoking, according to a 2012 report from the Surgeon General. The report concluded that "giving an R rating to future movies with smoking would be expected to reduce the number of teen smokers by nearly 1 in 5, preventing up to 1 million deaths from smoking among children alive today," according to the CDC.

In today's climate, Netflix's increased portrayal of tobacco usage was so unusual that a few Reddit users noticed it last summer, prompting one user to begin a thread titled "Did Netflix get in bed with Big Tobacco?"

"I haven't seen smoking cigarettes get this much air time in what feels like over ten years. Many of the Netflix originals seem to feature people smoking for no real reason other than to put smoking onscreen again, and that makes me suspect that money has changed hands," the user wrote. "Has anyone else noticed this trend?"

Many others had, though there is nothing to suggest the streaming company received any compensation for showing tobacco use.

Regardless of why the characters are seen smoking, it's striking that many of the shows included in the study, such as "Stranger Things" and "Fuller House," are aimed at children.

"We also know that the normalisation of tobacco use in movies does have a strong impact on a child's risk of future tobacco use," David Hill, chairman for the American Academy of Pediatrics' Council on Communications and Media told US News and World Report. "We know that there's a dose-dependent effect between exposure to tobacco use in movies and television shows and a child's subsequent risk of tobacco use."

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