

Teens recognize risk behavior in movies and series, but are not always critical

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Credit: Karolina Kaboompics from Pexels

When teens see risk behavior such as drinking, smoking or drug use in movies or series, they sometimes find it difficult to define whether it's realistic or not. They recognize stereotypes but cannot always interpret it

critically. This is according to research by Anne Sadza of Radboud University. "By talking to teenagers about the risk behavior they see, you can help start a critical process."

For her research, communications scholar Anne Sadza interviewed teens between the ages of 14 and 17 about movies and series they watched and how they rated the behavior of main characters. The findings are [published](#) in the *Journal of Communication*.

"What we saw is that these teens generally recognize risk behavior and can also often see the role of risk behavior in the story. For example, they recognize that someone smokes to make that person appear tough. Stereotypes are well understood. But that does not mean that they then reflect critically," Sadza says.

American films

The degree of critical reflection depends in part on how much personal knowledge they have of risk behavior: for example, do they encounter it in their own environment? If not, they quickly fall back on media portrayals.

"They then say, for instance, about [movies](#) that feature Spring Break: This is not realistic for me, but it is realistic for America. They then say they know this because they have seen it in other American films," says Sadza.

The same applies to drug use: if they have no experience with (someone's) [drug use](#), they fall into stereotypes. Sadza states, "They see someone who is on drugs and has lost everything and then say that this is very realistic, because this is the image they see more often in media."

Critical reflection

With this [insight](#), we can learn how to encourage [teens](#) to critically reflect on what they see. "With [younger children](#), media use can be regulated, but with teenagers it is more difficult. It is more important that they themselves have tools to deal critically and consciously with portrayals in which [risk behavior](#) occurs.

"They often said in our research, 'I never really think about it that much, but now that we're talking about it....' By talking to young people about what they see, you trigger a critical interpretation process. Sometimes parents think teenagers already know everything about media, but it's wise to start the conversation anyway," says Sadza.

More information: Anne Sadza et al, Mediated risks through rose-tinted glasses? Exploring barriers and boosters to critical deconstructions of mediated risk behavior by Dutch adolescents, *Journal of Communication* (2024). [DOI: 10.1093/joc/jqae025](https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqae025)

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