

Targeting Vulnerable Consumers: The Marketing of Indoor Tanning to Young Adults

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Abstract

The Center for Disease Control (2012) has reported that young adults are the heaviest users of indoor tanning services, therefore it is not surprising that the tanning salon industry targets young adults with their promotions. For instance, salons promote special prices for building a “base tan” in the time prior to school breaks (Kwon et al. 2002; U.S. House Committee, 2012). Media selection for tanning salon advertising is also consistent with the pursuit of the youth segment. Targeted media have included billboards near college campuses, advertising in university and high school papers, and heavy use of social media. The messages appeal to young adults, with content ranging from the personal fashion statement made by a tan to the feelings of relaxation, escape, or rejuvenation that can come with indoor tanning (Greenman and Jones, 2010). Aside from price deals, the most consistent message communicated to potential and current young indoor tanners is that tanned skin is requisite for youthful beauty, fitness, and slenderness, and for the social acceptance of one’s body (Poorsatter and Hornung, 2008).

The dermatology literature reports that tanning produces endorphins which are addictive (Holman et al. 2013; Adinoff 2012; Zeller et al. 2006). Endorphins provide pleasurable feelings which help individuals cope with moods, stress, and even pain. As do individuals who are drug addicted, some indoor tanners report experiencing withdrawal symptoms if they stop tanning (Kaur et al., 2006). Such withdrawal symptoms explain why some individuals continue tanning in spite of well-known efforts to educate the public about the dangers of the practice (Adinoff 2012; Beasley and Kittel 1997).

Tanning addiction may also develop from behavioral conditioning, since behavior which is rewarded either psychologically or physically tends to be repeated (Nolan et al. 2009). Social learning may also explain compulsive or addictive behavior (Hirschman 1992). Perhaps the most frequently mentioned motivation for tanning is the strong desire for the enhancement of one’s physical appearance (Cafri et al. 2006; Heckman, Wilson, and Ingersoll 2009). The media have relentlessly promoted a feminine ideal of the tanned and sexy, thin woman which results in body

dissatisfaction among many women (Greenman and Jones 2010; Stapleton et al. 2009). The impact of social rewards on tanning is irrefutable (Cafri et al. 2006).

Our study was based on a purposeful snowball sample of 154 young adult indoor tanners (88 percent female, mean age of 25) in a Midwest metropolitan area who averaged 7.0 tanning episodes per month. Using a scale modified from the study of alcoholism, we found that 32.5 percent of our sample was addicted to UV light. Addicted respondents were significantly heavier indoor tanning users, higher in appearance motivations and more influenced by friends' and media norms. While addicted indoor tanners were significantly higher in psychological vulnerability, they were as likely as non-addicted tanners to state that skin cancer was a risk of indoor tanning. However, both addicted tanners and non-addicted tanners greatly understated the risk of cancer.

Addiction is a condition in which consumers find they are unable to appropriately control their behavior or its outcomes and so are vulnerable to exploitative marketing tactics. Our findings on the addiction of indoor tanners suggest that some indoor tanners should be designated as vulnerable, open to exploitation and in need of greater regulatory protection. O'Guinn and Faber (1989) and Potenza (2006) described addictive behavior as characterized by (1) very strong motivations or cravings to perform a behavior (2) behavior which results in immediate gratification but which leads to longer term problems (3) weak control of the behavior and its repetition, and (4) a tendency to deny the negative results of the continued behavior. The data from this study indicate that all four criteria for vulnerability were met in our sample of young adult tanners.

If people are highly motivated to participate in harmful behaviors and do not internalize the risks of the behavior, and furthermore if their control of the behavior is weakened because they are addicted, it is reasonable to designate them as consumers who are vulnerable to marketing appeals (Baker et al. 2005). These dependent individuals are not able to make marketplace decisions about indoor tanning that lead to desirable personal outcomes. For these reasons the authors believe that strong consideration should be given to increased consumer protection of these individuals through the regulation of advertising messages, advertising media, pricing practices and other promotional practices, as well as through restrictions on access by vulnerable target groups.

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