



'A real man smells of tobacco smoke'—Chinese youth's interpretation of smoking imagery in film

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have associated youth's exposure to filmic images of smoking with real-life smoking acquisition; initial research in low- and middle-income countries confirms this relationship. The present study in Yunnan, southwest China sought answers to the following questions: How do young people in China make sense of smoking imagery they have seen in film? How are these perceptions shaped by the cultural and social context of images? How do these understandings relate to real-life tobacco use? A study with focus groups and grounded theory was conducted in 2010 and 2011 (Sept–Jan) with middle-school students ages 12 and 13 ($n = 68$, focus groups = 12, schools = 6). Films and media literacy were important means through which knowledge about smoking was constructed and communicated. Film representations of smoking concurred with Chinese social behaviour (Confucian social networks, face-making, and the notion of society as a harmonious social unit), and were interpreted as congruent with real-life smoking. This pattern, in turn, was intertwined with perceived gender identities of smokers, gender-specific social behaviour, and willingness of girls to explore issues of gender equity. These findings lend new insights into interaction between smoking imagery in film and Chinese youth's smoking beliefs. Tobacco control programs in China should consider young people's interpretations of smoking and the ways they are nested in cultural and social milieu.

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Introduction

Tobacco smoking is a major public health challenge in China, and the country is the world's largest tobacco consumer and producer. Surveys in various Chinese cities report a high prevalence of smoking among youth, and a high rate of smoking initiation has been shown to occur between ages 10 and 15 (Yang, Fan, & Tan, 1999; Yang et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2000; Unger, Li, Chen, et al., 2001; Zhu, Liu, Shelton, Liu, & Giovino, 1996). Research on the smoking habits of young people in China is limited; the main thrust of studies hitherto has been quantitative population surveys of self-reported smoking behaviour, and few qualitative studies have been conducted (Hesketh, Qu, & Tomkins, 2002; Wang et al., 2000; Weiss, Palmer, Chou, Mouttapa, & Johnson, 2008; Yang et al., 2004; Zhang, Wang, Zhao, & Vartiainen, 2000). Research has associated adolescent's smoking in China with variables such as age, sex, socio-economic status, parental supervision, quality of family relationships, peer

smoking and psychological factors such as anxiety, depression and hostility (Chen, Unger, Cruz, & Johnson, 1999; Hesketh et al., 2002; Unger, Li, Johnson, et al., 2001; Weiss et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2000). However, further research is needed.

There has been increasing interest in smoking imagery in popular media and its relation to smoking beliefs and behaviour (Lum, Polansky, Jackler, & Glantz, 2008; McCool, Cameron, & Petrie, 2003; Pierce, Gilpin, & Choi, 1999). The tobacco industry promotes its brands in films, adding powerful meanings to smoking which are watched by many young people (Lum et al., 2008). Tobacco depiction in film is now highly prevalent, and has been studied extensively in the context of viewer's smoking habits (National Cancer Institute, 2008). Studies demonstrate that exposure to smoking in movies promotes youth smoking uptake in high-income countries, and greater levels of exposure are associated with increased probability of smoking initiation; initial research in low- and middle-income countries suggests this relationship is consistent across countries (Arora et al., in press; National Cancer Institute, 2008; Thrasher, Jackson, Arillo-Santillan, & Sargent, 2008; Thrasher et al., 2009). However, research on this topic in China is limited, despite the substantial burden of tobacco use.

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China has the fastest growing new cohort of smokers globally, and opportunities for market growth are not missed by the tobacco industry which uses media in marketing strategies. Research in China (published nationally, in Chinese language journals) reports a high frequency of smoking scenes in animations, cartoons, dramas and movies watched by young people. For example, junior middle-school students surveyed by Huang et al. (2002) in four Chinese cities considered smoking scenes important and noticeable aspects of the films they had watched. An analysis by Er, Liu, Gao, and Niu (2008) of smoking scenes in 15 movies identified 134 scenes with a total duration of 70.7 min; their comparison of Chinese- and foreign-made movies revealed higher frequencies and durations of smoking scenes in the former. Research by Zhang and Duan (2008) and Lv, Duan, Wang, and Zeng (2010) reported a high frequency of smoking scenes in animations and cartoons watched by youth. Consequently, Chinese scholars have raised concerns about the possible influence of media on adolescent's smoking habits, which calls for research into interpretations of smoking scenes in film.

Studies conducted in other countries reveal insights into this topic. McCool, Cameron, and Petrie's (2001) study in New Zealand with 12- and 13-year-olds found that filmic images of smoking were perceived to be highly prevalent and recognisable. Stereotypical images of smokers symbolised glamour, toughness and sexiness; and smoking scenes were associated with stress relief and maturity. In a subsequent study of older teenagers (ages 16 and 17; McCool et al., 2003), film was interpreted as a credible portrayal of emotion, subculture and lifestyle. The older adolescents' experiences of tobacco held greater credibility than the stereotyped images which the younger group regarded accessible and meaningful. Further studies are now needed in other countries, especially in China where research is sparse. Therefore, the present study examines Chinese youth's interpretation of smoking in film.

The foundation of this study is Social Representations Theory which has been influential in social science since its development by Moscovici in the 1960s and 1970s as an extension of Durkheim's notion of representations (Flick, 1998; Moscovici, 1976). Social representations are the shared beliefs, identities, practices, and subculture affiliations among members of groups, and demarcate the social world as a system of common understanding and meaning (Duveen & Lloyd, 1990; Moscovici, 1976). Social representations hinge on a semiotic triangle of the object being represented, the person making the representation, and the social group in which they are positioned (Moscovici, 1984). Meaning denotes collective representation of naming and understanding which is created through social negotiation with others and social milieu. Therefore, social representations emphasise the socially dynamic, dialectical and hybrid nature of social knowledge embedded and distributed in social and interactive process. The media and media literacy are relevant to social representations because they constitute an important means through which information and knowledge are communicated. From this perspective, the viewer is an active participant in production and interpretation of meaning through social processes, providing a code for social exchange embedded in inter-group communication (Flick, 1998; Morgenson, 1992; Sommer, 1998).

Building on this rationale, the present study investigates Chinese adolescent's interpretations of smoking imagery in film from a social representations perspective. Specifically, we sought answers to the following questions: How do young people in China make sense of smoking imagery in film? How are these perceptions shaped by the context of images as portrayed in their culture and society? How do these understandings relate to real-life tobacco use? Through answering these questions we develop a grounded theory of adolescent's understandings of smoking imagery in

relation to their smoking beliefs and behaviours, underpinned by their cultural and social milieu.

Method

Design

A study design consisting of focus group interviews and grounded theory methodology was used to explore participants' interpretations of smoking imagery in everyday film experiences.

Participants & sampling

The study was conducted in Kunming, which is the cultural, economic and political centre of Yunnan Province, southwest China. This location was chosen because it is a major metropolitan area, and there is a lack of localised information of youth's smoking which hampers development of tobacco control strategies. A total of 80 students (ages 12 and 13; 40 boys, 40 girls), Han Chinese (the dominant group in Kunming) with Mandarin as their first language, was recruited. The age-range and ethnicity of participants was restricted because earlier studies (McCool et al., 2001, 2003) reported demographic differences in appraisals of filmic images. Although participants' media usage was not quantitatively surveyed in the present study, they reported that they had spent a significant proportion of their week watching films (Chinese and Western films).

The sampling method was sequential, with selective sampling, to investigate socio-demographic nuances of film interpretation, followed by theoretical sampling. The selective sampling covered Kunming's five urban districts, and district average income was used as a proxy measure of social economic status. Schools in each district were then ranked according to academic performance, and every *n*th school was selected on rank lists (two from each district). These ten schools were invited to participate in the study, and six agreed. Within each school, students were selected randomly from classes. Two focus groups (one with females; another with males) were conducted per school on the same day. The final sample consisted of 68 students, six middle schools, and twelve focus groups with 5–6 students per group.

Theoretical sampling began in the earliest stages of data collection with modification of questions to explore emergent themes. However, the main thrust of theoretical sampling took place towards the end of the study, and after all schools had been sampled, to clarify and develop concepts. This included follow-up meetings with 9 participants, and subsequent recruitment of 12 new participants. For example, transcripts collected during selective sampling revealed associations of interpretations of stress and the *gaokao* (an exam which the students will sit in the future) but not current academic performance; therefore, the "Image and realities of stress" category was saturated by asking participants to clarify this apparent contradiction.

Procedure

Students were recruited by appropriate staff in each school. The focus groups took place in 2010 and 2011 (Sept–Jan); each focus group consisted of five or six students, and was 55–65 min. They were facilitated by a native Chinese postgraduate student (who is also a registered counsellor) and an assistant. School staff and teachers were not present during data collection so that students felt more at ease at discussion. The focus groups commenced with an informal warm-up discussion of participant's interests, which then moved on to imagery in films. The grounded theory presented in this paper was based largely on emergent themes which stemmed from the data, constructed by the participants, rather than

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