

Gender differences in adolescents' responses to themes of relaxation in cigarette advertising: Relationship to intentions to smoke

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Abstract

Studies have shown that increased exposure to cigarette advertising increases adolescents' risk of smoking and moreover, that gender may play an important role in moderating how cigarette advertisements are viewed and processed. However, information about the particular features of cigarette advertising that interact with gender to promote smoking among adolescents is scarce. The purpose of this study was to examine if gender moderates the degree to which the relaxation valence (i.e., degree to which relaxing themes are emphasized) of cigarette advertisements is related to smoking intentions in a sample of never smoking adolescents. Regardless of brand type (of the seven brands studied), cigarette advertisements that displayed highly relaxing images were associated with increased intentions to smoke among female adolescents only. These results have implications for understanding what features of cigarette advertisements have the most influence among different groups of adolescents.

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1. Introduction

Smoking prevalence rates among middle and high school students have diminished since the late 1990s. However, the most recent national data suggest that this rate of decline has slowed in the last

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3 years (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2005). The current (as of this writing) 30-day smoking prevalence rate (those reporting smoking on one or more of the 30 days prior to the survey) stands at 9.3% of 8th graders and 23% of 12th graders (Johnston et al., 2005). More broadly, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002) has estimated that lifetime use of tobacco will result in approximately 250 million tobacco-related deaths of children and young people alive in the world today if current patterns persist. Clearly, then, it remains important for the public health to determine what promotes cigarette use among adolescents in order to develop and refine smoking prevention programs.

Cigarette advertising is one environmental source that likely influences future smoking among adolescents (Wakefield, Flay, Nichter, & Giovino, 2003). The tobacco industry, as whole, spent over 15 billion dollars on advertising and marketing in 2003 (Federal Trade Commission, 2005). A recent study from the World Health Organization found that 73% of children and adolescents worldwide had been exposed to print media cigarette advertisements in the past 30 days (WHO, 2002). Theory suggests that cigarette advertising probably has its most potent effects on promoting smoking initiation among adolescents (Flay, 1993; Flay & Petraitis, 1994; Levanthal & Cleary, 1980; Shadel, Niaura, & Abrams, 2001; see also Wakefield et al., 2003) and studies have suggested that increased awareness of, receptivity to, and liking of cigarette advertising all contribute to increases in smoking initiation among adolescents (Choi, Ahluwalia, Harris, & Okuyemi, 2002; Evans, Farkas, Gilpin, Berry, & Pierce, 1995; Pierce et al., 1991; Pierce, DiStafan, Jackson, & White, 2002; Sargent et al., 2000). Indeed, Pierce, Choi, Gilpin, Farkas, and Berry (1998) found that “the percentage of experimentation attributable to tobacco advertising and promotional activities is 34.3%”, based on calculations from a longitudinal survey conducted on 12 to 17-year-olds. This percentage is equal to 17% of the overall population for this age group.

Despite what theory predicts and data such as these demonstrate, there is a paucity of information about how individual differences among adolescents, like gender, and features of cigarette advertising interact to contribute to the relationship between cigarette advertising and adolescent smoking (Shadel et al., 2001; cf., Shadel, Niaura, & Abrams, 2004b). Both individual-level and communication-level (i.e., advertisement) factors are important in studies of persuasion and communication (Petty & Wegener, 1999). It stands to reason, then, that both are important to consider when studying adolescents' responses to cigarette advertising (Shadel et al., 2001).

Some insight into how cigarette advertisements might be constructed to appeal differentially to males and females has come from careful examination of tobacco company documents relating to advertising and marketing. Tobacco companies seem to have designed different cigarette brands and marketing campaigns to appeal to consumer groups based on so-called psychological and psychosocial “needs” of those groups, such as smoking to relieve stress (Le Cook, Wayne, Keithly, & Connolly, 2003). In particular, targeting consumers appears also to have occurred when manufacturing and marketing cigarettes for each gender. Carpenter, Wayne, & Connolly (2005) found that the tobacco industry has targeted women with specific cigarette brands (e.g. Virginia Slims) and paired these “feminine style” cigarettes with advertisements promoting female liberation, glamour, success and thinness. Indeed, research from outside of the tobacco industry seems to underscore the success of these gender-segmenting strategies in the field. Major marketing expenditure shifts toward a female market have been historically associated with increases in smoking among young women (Pierce, Lee, & Gilpin, 1994; see also Boyd, Boyd, & Cash, 1999–2000), adolescent females seem to be more responsive to cigarette advertising imagery in general (Covell, Dion, & Dion, 1994), and cigarette advertisements that emphasize more feminine images are associated with more positive affective reactions among adolescent females compared to those advertisements that emphasize more masculine images (Shadel, Niaura, &

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