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Medicine

NUDGING YOUNGSTERS TO BE SMART CONSUMERS OF MEDIA MESSAGES

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KEYWORDS:

In the United States, cigarette smoking is the leading cause of preventable death and disease. About 90% of individuals with smoking-related deaths initiate smoking during early adolescence, and each day nearly 4400 American youth between the ages of 12 and 17 years initiate cigarette smoking. Despite efforts to address this fast uptake of smoking among adolescents, school-based smoking prevention programs have largely not been successful in affecting clinically relevant smoking behaviors.

In the age of modern media, youth aged 8–18 years are exposed to 8 hours and 33 minutes of media content daily, including content offering a substantial number of positive impressions of cigarette smoking. Preliminary studies have demonstrated an association between exposure to certain media messages and smoking in adolescents. Over half of the cases of smoking initiation during adolescence are linked to watching smoking in movies, and the exposure to media messages such as tobacco promotions and advertisements also significantly increases the risk of smoking initiation during adolescence. A pioneering effort by Dr. Kiran Panuganti, currently a hospitalist and Vice Chair of Medicine at Texas Presbyterian Hospital in Denton, is advocating media literacy as a promising framework for developing innovative smoking prevention programs. Dr. Panuganti's approach is simple, "put the message straightforward." Using the behavioral economics principles of "nudging", Dr. Panuganti has used the web and the smartphone to spread his message – a kind of simple way to "go with the wave". Using a method of soft paternalism, Dr. Panuganti is encouraging the youth in acknowledging the effects of media on attitudes and behavior, teaching the youth to understand, analyze, and evaluate advertising and other media messages, enabling them to actively process media messages rather than passively remaining message targets. Dr. Panuganti is passionate about primary prevention and deeply appreciates that changing behavior is a highly challenging task.

Media literacy has been shown to be potentially useful in reducing other harmful health behaviors such as alcohol use, disordered eating by enhancing personal body imagery, and aggression. Additionally, media literacy's potential efficacy is grounded in health behavior theory. In particular, media literacy can reduce certain positive attitudes and norms that, according to the Theory of Reasoned Action of Fishbein and Ajzen (1967), can lead to harmful intentions and behaviors. Numerous environment influence smoking behavior initiation: demanding parenting, parental smoking, sibling smoking, friend smoking, electronic media use, and stress as well as the adolescents/youths' intrinsic characteristics, including self-report of school grades, depression, self-esteem, rebellious behavior, sensation-seeking, and knowledge of the harm and addictiveness of tobacco. Dr. Panuganti's methodologies to buffer the impact of media messages on adolescent smoking is highly novel.

Because media messages can affect not only smoking behavior but also eating behavior, aggression, sexual behavior, and alcohol use, Dr. Panuganti's efforts in enhancing media literacy may also be useful in buffering harmful health behaviors beyond smoking, showing the wide influence of this apparently simple, but elegant approach. Although it is important to continue to attempt to reduce the amount of exposure to potentially harmful media messages during adolescence, it is not always pragmatically feasible to do so. Media literacy is a practical and empowering co-intervention and Dr. Panuganti's position in reaching out to the communities, as well as to wider mass through the web and smartphone applications, are a classic achievement in behavioral modifications through thoughtful cost-conscious high value care approaches. Dr. Panuganti aims at the root of the problem!

Adolescents start smoking in response to social influences, emulating the behavior of friends, family members, and other people they admire. The influence of smoking by friends and family members has been extensively studied, but less attention has been given to influences of the media other than tobacco advertising. Yet the typical adolescent spends 2-3 hours per day watching television and films. Movie channels, Netflix and home videos have greatly increased children's access to films. Recent studies have shown that American adolescents watch an average of three films a week (150 a year). Although cigarette smoking is infrequent on primetime television, it is depicted in almost all films. Adolescents see film stars smoking in the context of toughness (John Travolta in Broken Arrow), sexuality (Sharon Stone in Basic Instinct), romance (Charlie Sheen in The Chase), and adolescent rebellion (Leonardo DiCaprio in Romeo and Juliet) and additionally as a way to relieve stress (Winona Ryder in Girl Interrupted). Not surprisingly, smoking by adolescents' favorite film stars has been linked with smoking adoption among adolescents.

The movie industry has been criticized for its depictions of smoking on screen, but industry representatives are typically skeptical that viewing smoking influences behavior, as there is no case-control study obtaining objective evidence for this correlation. A typical adolescent watching 150 films a year will be exposed to about 800 depictions of smoking. Given this high level of exposure to films, the typical adolescent could see more smoking in films than in the actual world. In addition, movie tobacco use has greater relevance to adolescents than smoking in the real world. Adolescents whose parents smoke are somewhat less responsive to the influence of films, possibly because seeing their parents smoking gave them a more reality-based perception of cigarette smoking.

Dynamic social changes occur between early adolescence (junior high school) and later adolescence (high school). Older teens are in the process of solidifying a sense of self and tend to become more resistant to direct influence (e.g., regarding peer influence on smoking). Older teens also tend to socialize in contexts of heterosexual crowds, less mutually dependent on small groups of same-sex peers, and they tend to begin dating and engage in other preparation for an adult lifestyle. Intrapersonal motivations become more important. Yet, older teens exhibit rapid neurobiological changes. Reinforcers may be experienced as relatively rewarding compared to later in adulthood, whereas executive inhibitory processes may not operate as efficiently. For example, the reinforcing value of some behaviors (e.g., kissing, alcohol use) may be much greater than later in adulthood, but there is relatively less inhibitory neocortical functioning in operation. Age-relevant reinforcing behaviors may tend to be associated with each other among older teens. For example, smoking intentions in older

adolescence may be related to interest in dating. Intrapersonal motivations tend to dominate as precursors of risky or health behaviors throughout adulthood (e.g., regarding parental control and refusal self-efficacy). However, older teens may be more sensitive and react negatively to social pressures that contradict their attempts to achieve a sense of self. Thus, instruction in such tobacco and other drug use prevention strategies as refusal assertion training may be received rather negatively by older teens compared to younger or older age groups. Dr. Panuganti distinguishes in cleverly using Sunstein and Thaler's approaches of "nudge" to put across the key message in a straightforward fashion, which the adolescents are often receptive.

While young adolescence has been identified as being the period in which much of smoking initiation occurs, older teen non-smokers (e.g., 9th graders) are still susceptible to beginning smoking, particularly if they perceive smoking as resulting in social benefits (e.g., appearing attractive to potential romantic partners) or if they are tolerant of tobacco industry behavior or even ignorant of such underlying subtleties of the industry. Tobacco and other drug use may come to serve more as a stress-coping (intrapersonal) function as the substance use acquisition process enters a more advanced phase (regular use). Dr. Panuganti intelligently designs the contents of the website based on popular psychosocial theories. He extensively utilizes Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development, which addresses critical phases of social structure development based on age groups as follows: infancy: 1 to 18 months, basic trust; early childhood: 18 months to 3 years old, autonomy of self; play age: 3 to 5 years, initiative; school age: 6 to 12 years, industriousness; adolescence: 12 to 18 years, identity; young adulthood: 18-35 years, intimacy and solidarity; middle adulthood: 35 to 65 years, generativity; late adulthood, 65-death, integrity. Dr. Panuganti extends and applies Erikson's ideas and suggests that smoking prevention is best implemented during adolescence to help them resolve role confusion and achieve a positive identity. Dr. Panuganti's website www.thinkbeforefollowing.com also urges the young girl adolescents to not follow popular advice in vogue, for example, the apparent perception of the positive impact of smoking on weight loss and body image.

Risk factors and mediating processes that lead to tobacco or other drug use change over the life span. It is usually believed that there are three developmental stages relevant to tobacco use: (a) elementary to junior high school (increasing interest in peer acceptance, wider access, and exposure to cigarettes; onset of puberty), (b) junior to senior high school (new brain connections occurring), and (c) high school to independent living. The youth who are relatively precocious may begin tobacco use during elementary school. The transition into junior high school and greater need for peer acceptance, along with social images suggesting that tobacco use might increase peer acceptance, or simply due to mere curiosity and increased access, may lead to tobacco initiation at that transition period. Entry into senior high school may also be a second period in which youth may be at risk for beginning or escalating tobacco or other drug use, for social benefits. Also, risky, pleasurable behaviors are likely to be most rewarding during that time when new brain connections are occurring (greater limbic system response and less neocortical inhibition. When entering into adulthood, some persons may decide to terminate tobacco or other drug use, whereas others may decide that tobacco or other drug use is an important aspect of their identity, leading to continued experimental or regular use.

The incidence of media images of smoking has increased since the early 1990s. Contributing to the prevalence of smoking in the media is the tendency for film producers to rely on cigarettes to convey character information. This is often considered by communication professionals as a 'lazy way' to communicate depth of character, when the same detail may be portrayed through other means. Tobacco use is most frequently used to reveal character insight or to portray reality, despite the fact that movies portray smoking to be far more prevalent than is the case in reality.

In addition to over-estimating the use of tobacco, popular media also tend to associate it with more favorable attributes or situations. This is of concern given that the media has a powerful role in reflecting and influencing youth culture. Young people are more likely to learn and imitate behaviors performed by role models or if they are associated with positive outcomes such as power, sex, romance, social status and success. In addition, images of smoking in the media portrayed as 'realistic' and often incidental increase the likelihood that smoking is normalized and made to appear socially acceptable. Being 'cool' is important to teenagers and is integral to the image they present to their peers. The art of being cool involves looking cool without trying to look cool. Teenagers perceive that trying to look cool is definitely uncool. Thus, the way smoking is represented and who is seen to be smoking has the potential to influence teenage attitudes towards smoking. If teenagers believe that smoking adds to their quest for 'coolness', they may be more likely to imitate the smoking behavior of role models.

Young people appeared to rely on elements of attractiveness, style, environment and perceived personality to guide their rating of smoking and smokers in media scenes. The tendency for young people to seek clues, such as clothing and background, when forming perceptions of images in the media has been reported previously and fits with the theory of the 'halo' effect posited by Rossiter and Percy in 1987 and extended by Cialdini in 1988. This theory suggests that one positive characteristic can dominate the way a person is viewed by others. Research on the 'halo' effect shows that attractive people are often perceived as having characteristics they may not possess, such as intelligence, popularity and success. This is often described in terms of likeability and similarity. That is, if a young person sees someone as likeable (e.g. attractive and popular) and similar to themselves, i.e. someone they relate or aspire to, then they are more likely to look upon that person favorably, across a whole range of measures. In this way, smoking can also appear to be a desirable activity, even though young people are clearly well aware of the harmful health effects.

Young adulthood, frequently defined as the period from the late teens through the 20s, is a critical time for self-identity construction. According to Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood, identity exploration centers on love, work, and worldviews. Through experimentation with various life possibilities, young people move toward enduring decisions and values during this developmental period. Social media contributes to identity formation by facilitating reflexivity, or the process of reflecting on how we see ourselves and how others see us. In 2015, 90% of US young adults with Internet access used social media. Social media plays an important role in shaping self-beliefs and perceived social norms by inviting other people's feedback and shaping further modification of selfrepresentations. Social media gives users an opportunity to control their public personae and to experiment with more desirable versions of themselves. This can be done through a number of aspects of social media, including text, images, video, music, affinities ("likes"), visual customization of social media, use of profanity or slang, and group membership or affiliation, to name just a few. Dr. Panuganti combines all of these meaningfully to create awareness through the same versions of media (web, smartphone applications, twitter microblogging, Instagram etc) used by the young clients of the tobacco industry. These pragmatic aspects of Dr. Panuganti are clearly laudable, as it needs no mention of the number of diseases that are prevented by smoking cessation, both in short term and long term: control of high blood pressure, prevention of different cancers including some of the cancers that are leading causes of death in the United States (for example, lung cancer) and osteoporosis prevention in the female smoker.

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