



# Nonmedical use of prescription stimulants in college students: Attitudes, intentions, and vested interest



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Assessed the utility of vested interest theory for college student NUPS
- Vested interest moderated the relationship between attitudes and intentions.
- There was an attitude-intention link for moderately and highly vested students.
- Future campaigns might find it useful to manipulate vested interest to lower NUPS.

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Research on vested interest theory (VIT) indicates that the importance and hedonic relevance of attitudes moderates the link between attitudes and attitude-congruent behavior. Though largely untested in prevention research, this relationship may prove crucial in determining the success or failure of prevention efforts. The current study was designed to determine if subjectively perceived vested interest maximized the association between attitudes and intentions regarding the nonmedical use of prescription stimulants (NUPS).

**Methods:** A cross-sectional survey was conducted with college student respondents ( $N = 162$ ) using Amazon's MTurk. Participant age ranged from 19 to 49 years old. A subsample analysis ( $n = 129$ ) was also conducted with younger respondents, as the typical college student is usually under the age of 30.

**Results:** Four-step hierarchical regression analysis indicated that both attitudes and perceived vested interest were significantly associated with NUPS behavioral intentions ( $p < .001$ ). Further, vested interest moderated the relationship between stimulant-related attitudes and usage intentions ( $p < .001$ ). Attitudes were significantly associated with intentions of moderately and highly vested respondents ( $p < .001$ ), but not those of participants expressing low levels of perceived vested interest.

**Conclusions:** Findings support the proposition that vested interest may be a useful target for attenuating NUPS. Rather than attempting to weaken positive attitudes toward NUPS, campaigns may prove more successful if designed to convince receivers that NUPS is not in their best interest.

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## 1. Introduction

Research highlights the need to recognize and address high prevalence rates of nonmedical use of prescription stimulants (NUPS) (Donaldson, Nakawaki, & Crano, 2015), especially on college campuses (Bavarian, Flay, Ketcham, & Smit, 2013). NUPS is most prevalent among college-age individuals (Arkes & Iguchi, 2008; SAMHSA, 2013), 35.5% of whom report NUPS at least once (Low & Gendaszek, 2002). Nonmedical use of stimulants is associated with many adverse effects, including addiction (Sussman, Pentz, Spruijt-Metz, & Miller, 2006), suicidal ideation (Iversen, 2006), seizures (NIDA, 2012b), irregular

heartbeat, myocardial infarction, and sudden death (Gould et al., 2009; Westover & Halm, 2012).

Research designed to predict susceptibility to NUPS has revealed significant relationships between positive attitudes, past use, and future intentions (Looby, Kassman, & Earleywine, 2014; Ponnet, Wouters, Walrave, Heirman, & Van Hal, 2015). However, some researchers (Ponnet et al., 2015) have commented that attitudes might not capture the full motivational picture, prompting investigations of related factors that might predict NUPS. For many years, research in social psychology has been concerned with the link between respondents' attitudes and their subsequent behavior. The relevance of this association for prevention is clear. Prevention involves the dissemination of information and the attempt to persuade receivers of the information to accept it and alter their behavior accordingly (Crano, Siegel, Alvaro, & Patel, 2007). If the prevention model does not succeed in both tasks, it is unlikely to

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be successful. Merely informing or changing attitudes is not sufficient; the receiver must be induced to view message-congruent behavior as involving important and hedonically self-relevant outcomes (Crano & Prislin, 1995; Lehman & Crano, 2002). Considerable social psychological research indicates that attitudes do not inevitably predict behavior (Ajzen, 2005; Crano & Burgoon, 2002), and numerous moderators of attitude-behavior consistency (e.g., attitude strength and accessibility) have been identified (Crano & Prislin, 2006; Fazio & Petty, 2008). The current investigation is concerned with vested interest or the hedonic relevance of a behavior, a moderator shown to significantly increase attitude-behavior consistency (Crano, 1995, 1997; De Dominicis et al., 2014; Johnson, Siegel, & Crano, 2014; Miller, Adame, & Moore, 2013).

### 1.1. Vested interest theory

Vested interest theory (VIT) holds that people act in attitude-consistent ways when the outcome of the attitude-implicated behavior is deemed both important and hedonically relevant (Lehman & Crano, 2002). Considerable research indicates that highly vested attitudes are functionally related to behavior—vested interest moderates the relation between attitudes and actions (Crano, 1995, 1997; Miller et al., 2013; Thornton & Knox, 2002). For example, Sivacek and Crano (1982) experimentally investigated the link between vested interest and students' willingness to work against a university's proposed policy that substantially changed students' graduation requirements. Students had the option to work against the new policy by signing a petition, volunteering to fight the proposal, and pledging time to work against it. Analysis revealed a strong, significant relation between attitudes and behaviors among highly vested participants, which exceeded the attitude-behavior relation of less vested participants.

Earlier research has focused on the role of vested interest in motivating individuals to act on beliefs relevant to help seeking, for example, in battling depression (Johnson et al., 2014), in increasing organ donation intentions (Siegel, Alvaro, Lac, Crano, & Dominick, 2008), and in acting appropriately in high risk situations (De Dominicis et al., 2014). However, the theory has not been applied in prevention contexts or avoiding certain behaviors, specifically involving NUPS. Perceived vested interest is assessed explicitly in the current study by determining if respondents believe it is in their best interest to engage in NUPS to experience a range of positive outcomes. We expect that vested interest will moderate the relationship of attitudes on usage intentions, which have been shown repeatedly to predict behavior (Conner & Sparks, 2005; Orbeil, Hodgkins, & Sheeran, 1997). If vested interest moderates the attitude-behavior association in NUPS, it may be fruitful for future prevention efforts to change respondents' perceptions of subjective self-interest rather than focusing on the harms of NUPS. This could be accomplished by persuading receivers that stimulants do not enhance academic performance and attacking the belief that NUPS is in their self-interest. Before moving to explicit manipulation of perceptions of vested interest, it is necessary to determine if the attitude-behavior-vested interest relation operates as theorized.

### 1.2. Hypotheses and research questions

A survey was designed to assess the utility of the vested interest construct to NUPS. The research goal was to determine the strength of the attitude-action link under different levels of perceived vested interest. We hypothesized that subjectively perceived vested interest would moderate the relationship between attitudes toward NUPS and usage intentions. Higher levels of vested interest were expected to result in stronger attitude-intention relations: We expected attitudes to be most strongly associated with usage intentions among highly vested participants. Investigating the utility of vested interest in the attitude-intention equation may shed light on features important in the design and development of future prevention efforts.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Respondents

College students were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Respondents recruited through MTurk are demographically more varied and heterogeneous than traditional data sources (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013), and responses have been shown as reliable and valid as those obtained from via traditional sampling methods (Rand, 2012). Participation criteria were United States citizenship, current enrollment as a student at a US college or university, and the ability to read and write English. Respondents were compensated \$1.

In total, 205 respondents completed the survey; however, some were excluded from the analyses—if they did not indicate the college or university they attended, or did not report a valid college name. Five attention checks were incorporated in the survey, requiring respondents to mark a certain answer on a given item (e.g., "Mark strongly agree on this question"). Respondents were excluded if they missed two or more of these attention checks. Thirty-one respondents were excluded for missing two or more attention checks, four were excluded for failing to report a valid college or university, and seven were excluded for missing both the attention checks and the college question. One age outlier (age = 82) was also excluded from the analysis, as the target population was a typical college sample (i.e., 18–25 years; see Bavarian et al., 2013). The final exclusion rate was 20%, which is common with MTurk studies—the average rate of exclusion ranges from 3% to 40% (Berinsky, Margolis, & Sances, 2014; Chandler, Mueller, & Paolacci, 2014).

### 2.2. Procedure

After acceding to the MTurk survey offer, respondents were redirected to a link that opened an informed consent statement. Upon voluntary agreement to participate, respondents completed the survey and were debriefed.

### 2.3. Measures

Attitudes ( $\alpha = .91$ ) were assessed with six 7-point semantic differential items (Osgood, 1952). This measure has been used by health researchers (Crano et al., 2007; Crano & Burgoon, 2002) and has been shown to have satisfactory levels of internal consistency. The endpoints of the scales were anchored with the following adjectives: *bad-good*, *dangerous-safe*, *ineffective-effective*, *useless-useful*, *problematic-okay*, and *scary-comforting*. A mean composite captured the final measure of attitudes, ranging from 1 (*unfavorable*) to 7 (*favorable*).

A 4-item measure assessed NUPS intentions ( $\alpha = .84$ ), using 7-point Likert-type scales (*strongly disagree/strongly agree*). This measure was adapted from a prior marijuana intentions scale of high predictive validity for later use (Crano, Siegel, Alvaro, Lac, & Hemovich, 2008). Respondents were asked to indicate whether they disagreed or agreed with the following items: (1) If I had the opportunity now, I would use prescription stimulants nonmedically; (2) I will use prescription stimulants nonmedically, at least once or twice... (a) in the next 6 months; (b) in the next 12 months; (c) sometime in the future. A mean composite was computed for the final measure of intentions—lower scores represented fewer intentions to engage in NUPS.

A measure of subjective vested interest ( $\alpha = .99$ ) was adapted using the stimulant medication outcome expectancy questionnaire's 8-item academic subscale (Labbe & Maisto, 2010), and the prescription stimulant expectancy questionnaire-II's 20-item cognitive enhancement subscale (Looby & Earleywine, 2010). The final 22-item scale was assessed on 7-point Likert-type scales (*strongly disagree/strongly agree*). Respondents were asked to take a moment to think of all the good and bad things they believed could happen when using prescription stimulants

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