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Estimating the Pathways of an Antitobacco Campaign

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This study examined mechanisms through which the truth campaign, a national mass media antismoking campaign, influences smoking-related attitudes, and progression of tobacco use over time in youth and young adults.

Methods: Structural equation modeling tested causal pathways derived from formative research and behavioral theory with a nationally representative longitudinal sample of 15–21-year-olds ($n = 8747$) over 24 months. Data were collected from 2014 to 2016, and analyses were conducted in 2017.

Results: Greater ad awareness predicted strengthening of attitudes targeted by the campaign (i.e., feelings of independence from tobacco, antitobacco industry sentiment, decreasing acceptance of social smoking, and decreasing acceptance of smoking imagery), and attitude changes were significantly associated with greater support for an antitobacco social movement (e.g., agreement to the item “I would be part of a movement to end smoking”). Greater social movement support predicted a slower rate of progression on smoking intensity after two years of the campaign.

Conclusions: Findings suggest that engaging youth and young adults in a cause-based social movement for promoting health can be a powerful strategy to drive positive behavior change. Messages targeting attitudes that resonate with values important to this age group, including independence and connectedness, are particularly effective. Investments in national antitobacco public education campaigns are key policy interventions which continue to help prevent tobacco use among youth and young adults.

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IMPLICATIONS AND
CONTRIBUTION

Study findings highlight the importance of using messages based on the values and culture of the target audience. Further, findings suggest that engaging youth and young adults in a cause-based social movement for promoting health can be a powerful strategy to drive positive behavior and prevent tobacco use.

Mass media education campaigns have significantly contributed to the decline in tobacco use over the past two decades by changing social norms, attitudes, and intentions related to tobacco use, which can lead to long-term behavior change [1,2]. In 2016, 6% of U.S. high school students reported past 30-day cigarette smoking, representing a dramatic decrease from the over 20%

reporting use in the 1990s and early 2000s [3]. Additionally, patterns of smoking have changed in recent years, including increases in smoking initiation among young adults, declines in initiation among adolescents, and increases in nondaily and “social smoking” use patterns [4]. This shifting landscape of tobacco use requires innovative campaigns to effectively reach today’s youth and young adults and prevent smoking.

Using a unique message strategy, the truth FinishIt campaign was launched in 2014 with a call-to-action to join a social movement to end tobacco use. The campaign’s focus on an antitobacco social movement was developed based on a variety of formative

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research of the target audience, including quantitative (e.g., surveys of national samples) [5,6] and qualitative (e.g., focus groups and moderated online discussion boards) studies [5,7]. Formative research and psychological theories [8–11] indicate that autonomy, identity formation, and connections with others are valued by truth's target audience. Thus, ads were developed to reflect these values. For example, ads highlight how “social smoking” can trap young people in a cycle of addiction. Ads also showcase how tobacco use can negatively influence dating prospects, financial goals, and pets' health. Messages were crafted to target specific attitudes, including feeling independent from tobacco, having negative views of the tobacco industry and social smoking and perceiving smoking imagery (e.g., pictures of celebrities smoking) as unacceptable or setting a bad example.

The campaign sought to develop an informal social movement by garnering youth support to “be the generation that ends smoking” [9]. While content varied across ads, every ad included the overall campaign message of joining a social movement to end smoking. All ads employed the call for support and engagement in the social movement and provided ways to express that support, such as using hashtags on social media. Employing a generational social movement platform was part of an overall campaign strategy to motivate nonsmokers, both those with and without the intention to try smoking in the future, to reject smoking altogether. This approach leverages the gains made in decreasing smoking rates to focus attention on one key campaign goal: preventing the initiation and progression of tobacco use among nonsmokers by engaging this group in the cause of ending smoking.

A recent study provided initial evidence of the causal relationship between awareness of the truth FinishIt campaign and changes in targeted attitudinal constructs. Findings from this study demonstrated a dose-response relationship between awareness of truth messages and significant shifts in targeted antitobacco attitudes, support for an antitobacco social movement to end smoking, and intentions not to smoke among youth and young adults [5]. These findings represent the influence of the campaign on precursors to changes in tobacco use behavior using models that examine campaign effects on each construct independently. However, both theoretical considerations and the campaign design suggest the targeted constructs should relate to one another and that changes in behavior reflect intermediate changes in attitudes [12,13]. A path model enables a specific test of whether the campaign exerted its influence through the attitude changes as designed.

The present study tests the pathways through which campaign awareness influences progression of smoking behavior in youth and young adults. Specifically, we use a longitudinal framework to test the hypothesis that awareness of the campaign among never smokers reduces the progression of smoking behavior over time through a three-step mechanism: (1) ad awareness increases anti-smoking campaign-targeted attitudes: desire for independence from smoking, anti-industry sentiment, antisocial smoking sentiment, and antismoking imagery sentiment; (2) these changes in attitudes increase support for an antitobacco social movement; and in turn, and (3) increasing support for an antitobacco social movement slows smoking progression.

Methods

Sample and procedures

Data are from the Truth Longitudinal Cohort (TLC), a probability-based, nationally representative cohort, ages 15–21 years,

established to assess the impact of the truth campaign at changing smoking behavior over time. Participants who completed two or more online surveys across five waves and who reported at baseline (Wave 1) never having smoked a cigarette were included in the analyses ($n=8747$). Baseline data were collected April to August 2014 (prior to campaign onset) and follow-up data were collected every 6 months, with Wave 5 data collected July to October 2016.

The weighted survey response rate was 38.7% (AAPOR_Response Rate 3 [RR3] using quota limits); follow-up response rates ranged from approximately 72% (wave 2) to 65% (wave 5) of the wave 1 sample. Compared to Census estimates, the initial overall sample was represented by a somewhat larger proportion of participants from the Northeast and the Midwest regions. Furthermore, the total initial sample was represented by a slightly larger proportion of whites and slightly fewer African American and Hispanic participants. In order to generalize to the national population of 15–21-year-olds and to ensure that the sample is representative based on Census estimates, analyses used post-stratification longitudinal weights adjusted for selection probabilities, non-response, and attrition [14]. The study protocol was approved by Chesapeake Institutional Review Board (now Advarra). Other details regarding the delivery of the campaign, as well as additional Truth Longitudinal Cohort methods and response rates are available elsewhere [5,15,16].

Measures

Predictor variable: Cumulative truth ad awareness

A cumulative index was formed to reflect awareness of ads during 2 years of the campaign [17]. Using a procedure commonly employed for ad recall [6], at each wave, participants were shown four screenshots for each ad and were asked, “Have you seen this ad in the last 6 months?” Those who answered affirmatively were asked how frequently they had seen the ad (1 = *rarely*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often* and 4 = *very often*). Participants who had not seen the ad or who were missing data for that wave were recoded as (0) *not aware*. Twelve ads total were surveyed across Waves 2–5. The index was calculated as the sum of the frequency scores for all 12 ads (possible range = 0–48).

Pathway variables: Campaign-targeted attitudes

For each attitudinal construct, participants were asked their level of agreement for a series of two to five items (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*). Scores for each attitude were the average of all items for that construct for each wave; data from Waves 1–5 were used to control for respondent's previous attitudes on each of the campaign attitudes. All scales demonstrated acceptable or good reliability at baseline ($\alpha > .70$). The following are example items used to measure each construct. Independence from Tobacco: “*Not smoking helps me feel powerful.*” Anti-Industry Sentiment: “*Tobacco companies make me angry.*” Anti-Social Smoking Acceptability (reverse coded): “*People look cool when they smoke.*” Anti-Smoking Imagery: “*Celebrities who smoke set bad examples.*” Social Movement Support: “*I would be part of a movement to end smoking.*” The complete list of items and reliability statistics are available in the Appendix A. Confirmatory factor analysis, described elsewhere [5], suggested all items loaded satisfactorily to the corresponding construct.

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