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How social media influence college students' smoking attitudes and intentions

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ABSTRACT

Building on the influence of presumed influence (IPI) model, this study examines how smoking-related messages on social media influence college students' smoking. We surveyed 366 college students from three U.S. Midwestern universities in 2012 and examined the effects of expression and reception of smoking-related messages on smoking using path analysis. We found that the expression and reception of prosmoking messages not only directly affected smoking but also had indirect effects on smoking through (1) perceived peer expression of prosmoking messages and (2) perceived peer smoking norms. For antismoking messages, only reception had a significant indirect influence on smoking through (1) perceived peer reception of antismoking messages and (2) perceived peer smoking norms. In conclusion, social media function as an effective communication channel for generating, sharing, receiving, and commenting on smoking-related content and are thus influential on college students' smoking.

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1. Introduction

Recent data indicate that approximately 16% of U.S. college students report having smoked a cigarette at some point, 10.6% report having smoked within the past 30 days, and 2.5% report they smoke daily (American College Health Association, 2015). Of all age groups, college-aged adults (age 18–24 years) show the highest rate of current use of tobacco products (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013). To prevent smoking prevalence among college students, it is critical to understand how they develop attitudes toward cigarette smoking and what affects their smoking behaviors. According to the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985), individuals' attitudes toward behavior determine their behavioral intentions. Based on these theories, some scholars have examined the effects of smoking attitudes on smoking intentions among college students. Mao et al. (2009) found that higher prosmoking attitudes were associated with higher likelihood to smoke in the next 6 months. Ling, Neilands, and Glantz (2009) also found that aggressive and critical attitudes against the tobacco industry were positively related to intentions to

quit smoking.

Despite the considerable importance of smoking attitudes in predicting smoking intentions among college students, little is known about how social media usage affects students' attitudes toward smoking. The tobacco industry has been using social media as channels for the marketing and promotion of tobacco products (Freeman & Chapman, 2007; Freeman, 2012). During recent years, social media have been found to be the most significant predictor of college students' smoking. For example, disclosures of photos regarding smoking on social networking sites were indicative of their real-life smoking behaviors (van Hoof, Bekkers, van Vuuren, 2014). Zhu (2014) also found that prosmoking information scanning using social media influenced young adults' smoking behavior. Depue, Southwell, Betzner, and Walsh (2015) found that exposure to tobacco use in social media predicted future smoking tendencies among young adults. Given that social smoking is one of the most prominent patterns of tobacco use among college students (Levinson et al., 2007; Moran, Wechsler, & Rigotti, 2004), social media can function as an effective channel through which college students easily share their thoughts on smoking, which in turn foster their perceived peer norms on smoking. Thus, research needs to examine the effectiveness of social media in determining smoking attitudes as well as smoking intentions among college students.

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To fulfil the study needs, we explore the relationship between social media usage and cigarette smoking among college students within a theoretical foundation, drawing on the influence of presumed influence (IPI) model (Gunther & Storey, 2003). The IPI model has been widely employed to delineate how media messages about smoking influence a target audience's smoking via their effects on perceived peer norms (Gunther, Bolt, Borzekowski, Liebhart, & Dillard, 2006; Paek & Gunther, 2007; Paek, Gunther, McLeod, & Hove, 2011). According to the IPI model, individuals assume that mass media influence the attitudes and behaviors of their peers, and such assumption in turn affects their own attitudes and behaviors. From this perspective, college students may assume that smoking-related messages in social media will influence the attitudes and behaviors of their peers, and these perceptions about peers will influence their own smoking attitudes and behaviors.

Previous IPI studies have focused on looking at the effects of smoking-related content predominantly on traditional media (Gunther et al., 2006; Paek & Gunther, 2007; Paek et al., 2011); however, relatively few studies have examined the effect of smoking-related content on social media using the IPI model. Using the theoretical framework of the IPI model to explore how smoking-related messages in social media influence college students' smoking, this study adds to the currently small number of studies that apply the IPI model in social media settings (e.g., Bernhard, Dohle, & Vowe, 2015). In addition, the present study assumes that the acts of receiving and expressing messages on social media have distinct effects on the person so engaged, and thus distinguishes message expression and reception effects. This approach is differentiated from previous studies focused on exploring only reception effects (Gunther et al., 2006; Paek & Gunther, 2007; Paek et al., 2011). Lastly, this study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on the role of social media in predicting college students' smoking attitudes and intentions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. How social media affect attitudes and behavioral intentions

The IPI model provides a theoretical framework for understanding how social media affect public attitudes and behaviors with respect to a specific issue. The model predicts that a person may perceive influences of media on others and adapt their own attitudes and behaviors to correspond to that perception (Gunther & Storey, 2003). The IPI model identifies three causal relationships among the key components that explain the mechanism of media influence.

The first relationship is the association between exposure to media messages and perceptions of other people's exposure to media messages. According to Gunther and Storey (2003), people estimate others' exposure to media messages based on their own exposure. Thus, the more individuals attend to social media messages, the more likely they are to assume that these messages have a wide reach and believe that their peers would likewise pay attention to such media messages.

The second association refers to presumed media influence suggesting that individuals' perceptions of peer exposure to media messages can shape the perceptions of their peers' attitudes and behaviors toward an issue. People tend to assume that the more others are exposed to media messages, the more likely these media messages will have an effect on others' attitudes and behaviors (Gunther et al., 2006). In support of this suggestion, previous research has found that perceived peer exposure to a media message was significantly related to perceived prevalence of particular behaviors among peers (Gunther et al., 2006; Ho, Poorisat, Neo, & Detenber, 2014).

The third causal relationship of the IPI model pertains to the path from perceived peer norms to one's own attitudes and behaviors. According to a review of the social psychology literature (Gunther, 1998), peer norms have the potential to exert a purposeful influence on individuals. Foremost among several types of social norms is a perception that a certain behavior is prevalent among one's peers, also known as perceived descriptive norms. Descriptive norms refer to perceptions of how much or how frequently others engage in a particular behavior (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Given that the most salient social referents in college are peers, college students' health risk behaviors may be largely influenced by their perceptions of those of their peers.

Taken together, the influence of social media on attitudes and behaviors can be explained by these three steps of the IPI model. Individuals with greater exposure to social media messages assume these messages reach a wider audience, causing them to develop a subjective sense that more of their friends, acquaintances, and peers are exposed to and influenced by those messages. Thus, the perceived social media influence on peers will form, develop, or change individuals' attitudes and behavioral intentions.

2.2. IPI model for testing the effects of smoking-related messages in social media

2.2.1. Distinguishing the effects of message expression and reception

Social media have transformed the role of the message receiver from that of the audience to that of the user (Sundar, 2004). Social media users not only receive messages but also express their thoughts and ideas in their social networks. In this sense, the IPI model for testing the effects of social media messages should distinguish the effects of expressing and receiving messages.

Message construction requires cognitive elaboration, as one considers not only what one wishes to express but also the way in which that expression is likely to be received (Eveland, 2001, 2004). Indeed, after one has expressed a message, the perception of its meaning can change through the awareness that others will read it. This process, also called reasoning, refers to mental elaboration or collective consideration, and it encompasses both intrapersonal and interpersonal ways of thinking (Shah et al., 2007). After a message has been posted, an individual's perception of its meaning may change after he or she is aware that others have read it; this change in perception is one of commitment and consistency. Message writers can be influenced by their own message in a variety of ways, for instance, by mentally elaborating on what they expect that the message will mean to others, how they expect readers to react and respond to it, and by preemptively preparing their own responses (McLaughlin et al., 2016). Supporting this suggestion, van Hoof et al. (2014) found that college students' self-disclosure of photos related to tobacco on social media was directly associated with their real-life smoking behaviors. In the same vein, we argue that expressing smoking-related messages is significantly related to the message writers' future smoking behavior.

Additionally, people learn not only through their own experiences but also by observing the behavior of others and the results of those behaviors (Bandura, 2001). Health communication research has traditionally been dominated by a reception-effects paradigm in which most effects of communication are conceived as a consequence of informational or persuasive message reception (Fishbein & Cappella, 2006). Therefore, message reception has a substantial effect on the message recipients' thoughts, attitudes, or behaviors. Applying this message reception-effects paradigm to social media messages relevant to health risk behaviors suggests that exposure to risky content posted by friends can cultivate specific norms that are then rapidly spread through online

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