Running Head: Smoker Attractiveness

Are Smokers More Attractive? It Depends on Who You Ask

By

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Abstract

The marketing of cigarettes has emphasized cigarette smoking as highly desirable. Men are portrayed as masculine and attractive; women as attractive and social. In recent years, health concerns have made smoking more of a stigma where smokers are viewed more negatively. Two hundred and ninety-nine undergraduate students were recruited to complete a one page questionnaire that presented a photograph of a man (about 30 years of age) who either held a lit cigarette or a pen. They then answered 19 bipolar adjectives that evaluated the person pictured. Results indicated that….
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Cigarette manufacturers have spent millions of dollars to promote cigarette smoking as attractive and desirable. The “Marlboro” man was promoted as strong, masculine, adventurous and attractive (Eggleston & Gibbons, 1999); women who smoked “Virginia Slims” were advertised as feminine, desirable and independent (Boyd, Boyd & Cash, 1999). Among young adolescents, smoking was reported to signal power and status, whereas non-smokers were viewed as more average (Plumridge, Firtzgerald & Abel, 2002).

In recent years, health concerns about tobacco smoking have prompted an evolution in public sentiment away from smoking as desirable (Kim & Shanahan, 2003). Anti-smoking campaigns have shown some effectiveness in creating more negative stereotypes of smokers (Pechmann & Knight, 2002).

Studies have shown differences in how smokers are perceived. Children and adolescents viewed smokers as “cool,” sociable and intelligent (Aloise-Young & Hennigan, 1996; Freeman, Brucks & Wallendorf, 2005; Gillmore, Wells, Simpson, Morrison, Hoppe, Wilsdon & Murowchick, 2002). Pilo, Bak and Gibbons (2007) found three smoker prototypes, two positive and one negative: appearing cool and popular, appearing competent, and appearing childish and dull. Other studies have found a negative stigma associated with smoking (Goldstein, 1991), and this was especially true of pregnant women who smoked (Bull, Burke, Walsh & Whitehead, 2007).

Lee (1989) gave nursing students a written description of a young woman, who was either described as a smoker or not, and found mainly positive stereotypes regardless of the raters’ own smoking status. Other studies have found that smokers were rated as more attractive
(Beech & Whittaker, 2001), but some have reported smokers to be rated as less attractive (e.g., Callison, Karrh & Zillmann, 2002). Some of this variance was explained by the raters’ own smoking status: smokers tended to view other smokers more positively (e.g., Grogan, Fry, Gough & Conner, 2009; Taylor, Ross, Goldsmith, Zanna & Lock, 1998). One study found a difference in social perception between cigarette smokers and cigar smokers (Callison, et al., 2002).

Ethnicity has moderated these effects. Johnsen, Spring, Pingitore, Sommerfeld & MacKirnan (2002), for example, found differences in ratings between Hispanic women and non-Hispanic White women in their evaluations of smokers. Part of these findings depended on the level of acculturation among the Hispanic women (Johnsen, et al., 2002). Marin, Perez-Stable, Otero-Sabogal and Sabogal (1989) also reported that non-Hispanic Whites were more favorable toward smokers than Hispanics. Other studies have found differences among Asian-American men (e.g., Spigner, Shigaki & Tu, 2005); and at least one study reported less acceptance of smoking among African American students attending an Historically Black College (Laws, Huang, Brown, Richmond & Conerly, 2006).

The purpose of the current investigation was to explore how students attending liberal arts colleges, in Southern California, evaluated a White male who was pictured as either a smoker or non-smoker. It was hypothesized that the smoker would be seen as less attractive by non-smokers (and more negatively in general), but as more attractive (and more positively) among smokers. It was hypothesized that this trend would be more pronounced among female raters.
Methodology

Research Design and Procedures

The study design was an experimental survey. A single page questionnaire was developed that asked respondents to look at a photograph of a young man (about 30 years of age), who was seated at a table and holding either a lit cigarette (smoking condition) or a pen (non-smoking condition). Respondents were randomly assigned to these two conditions. A team of seven research assistants recruited participants from public spaces on one of three liberal arts colleges in Southern California (the colleges were part of a consortium of liberal arts colleges, and located within walking distance of each other). Participants were asked if they had a minute or two to help with a class project, and were then randomly assigned to the smoking or non-smoking condition in the study design.

Instrumentation

The single-page questionnaire had the following instructions:

“Psychologists have established that we all make judgments about people based on appearances. This study is about your evaluations of a young adult based upon the cues available in his or her picture (see below). Your participation is anonymous and voluntary (you must be 18 years or older to participate). You consent by completing this survey, however, you may withdraw your consent at any time and refuse to answer any or all questions. Please carefully examine the following photograph. On the basis of your review, please answer the following questions. (You may refer back to the picture if you like)"
The questionnaire then presented a (2 inch x 3 inch) color photograph of a bearded man sitting at a table. In front of him was a thick book and note pad. In the smoking condition, he held a lit cigarette, in the non-smoking condition, he held a silver pen.

Participants were then asked to evaluate the person based on 19 bi-polar adjectives on a seven point scale. One of these bi-polar adjective pairs was smoker/non-smoker, to make the smoking condition more salient. These adjective pairs are presented in the results section.

The instrument concluded with a brief demographic section that asked participants to indicate their sex, age, major, ethnicity, year in college, number of cigarettes smoked per day, number of drinks per week, and whether or not they were vegetarian. The questions about drinks and diet were intended to disguise the purpose of the questionnaire.

Research Participants

Over a weekend (in Fall 2012), a total of 299 participants were successfully recruited to participate in the research. Only seven (VERIFY) individuals refused to participate, for a response rate of over 96%. Of these participants, 114 (38.1%) were male, 178 (59.5%) were female, and 7 (2.3%) did not indicate a gender. Fifty (16.7%) of the respondents were in the first year of school, 52 (17.4%) were in their second year, 81 (27.1%) were in their third year, and 100 (33.5%) were in their fourth or fifth year of study (16 or 5.4% did not indicate year in school). The ethnicity breakdown of the sample was as follows: African American (21, 7.0%), Asian or Asian American/Pacific Islander (35, 11.7%), Chicano or Latino or Hispanic (35, 11.7%), White (170, 56.9%), and Other (31, 10.4%); 7 individuals, or 2.3% of the respondents, did not indicate their ethnicity. The mean age of the sample was 20.32 with a standard deviation
of 3.2 (and a range of 17 to 51), with 97% of the sample 22 years of age or younger. These demographic statistics generally matched the population from which the sample was drawn.

The sample had a breadth of majors, with 60 (20.1%) in the natural sciences, 119 (39.8%) in the social sciences, 50 (16.7%) in arts or humanities, 32 (10.7%) in an “other” major, and 30 (10.0%) undecided. The mean number of drinks per week was 5.65 with a standard deviation of 6.78 and a range of 0 to 50. The mean number of cigarettes per day was .83, with a standard deviation of 3.04 and a range of 0 to 30. The majority of the sample (245 or 81.9%) reported no cigarettes smoked; whereas 65 (21.7%) of the respondents reported no drinks in the previous week.

Analysis Plan

The data were analyzed according to a multi-step plan: (1) to test for overall smoker/non-smoker differences; (2) to test whether the respondents’ smoking status moderated these findings; (3) to test for gender differences; and (4) to explore tests of the hypotheses on factor scores generated from the 19 items in the bi-polar adjective checklist.

Results