IS SOCIAL MARKETING JUST SMOKE AND MIRRORS? ADOLESCENT FEMALE SMOKING

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ABSTRACT

It is estimated that tobacco use is responsible for more than 500,000 deaths every year across the EU (Ryan, 2000). In adolescence, higher rates of smoking are reported among girls than boys in an increasing number of European countries (Currie *et al.* 2004). Estimates by the World Health Organisation calculate that the number of women who smoke is set to almost triple on a global scale by the year 2025. This trend has also been confirmed in Europe. While men's smoking is slowly on the decline, smoking rates among women increased in 11 of the 25 EU member states between 1985 and 2003 (European Network for Smoking Prevention, 2007). The Irish Office of Tobacco Control's research has confirmed that initiation into smoking is largely a childhood phenomenon. More than 75% of all smokers in Ireland started to smoke before they reached the age of 18 (HBSC Ireland, 2006). The tobacco industry needs 50 Irish children to start smoking every day in order to maintain the size of its current Irish customer base (Office of Tobacco Control, 2007). The Irish National Health and Lifestyle survey 2002 states that almost half of Irish children have tried a cigarette. By the age of 15 to 17 years, one third of all boys and girls are smoking between three and six cigarettes a day. By the age of 15 years, more girls smoke than boys and by the age of 16 years, 80% of all smokers have become addicted. Smoking plays an important role in the social and physical environment of young people. Often young smokers, although aware of the health risks, minimise these risks for themselves, underestimate the risk of becoming addicted and do not relate their personal smoking to adult smoking behaviours (Lambert *et al.* 2002). The use of fear appeals is perhaps the most common tactic for social marketing, with threats of physical harm including injury and death used more frequently than social threats. The prevailing anti-tobacco appeal attempts to scare the target group into attitude and behaviour changes through the use of physical or social threat messages. According to the theory, people can be motivated to engage in desirable health behaviours not only to avoid health risks (physical threats) but also to avoid social or interpersonal risks (Dijkstra, *et al.* 1998). In a smoking context, studies have shown that an overall decline in smoking behaviour was noticed by adolescents who viewed an anti-smoking advertisement as opposed to adolescents who did not view an anti-smoking advertisement (Smith and Stutts, 2003).

This paper's main question is what should social marketing messages contain in order to reduce the amount of teenage female smokers? The research objectives were as follows: (1) What is the attitude of adolescents towards the health effects of smoking? (2) Are physical threat appeals more powerful than social threat appeals in preventing smoking among teenage girls? (3) How do high sensation seekers respond to anti-smoking communication versus low sensation seekers? Six focus groups were conducted between January and March 2010. The focus groups were held in secondary schools in Cork, Ireland. These schools were chosen in a convenient sample. The sample frame was female adolescents, aged between 15 and 16. These girls could be either smokers or non-smokers. The girls were shown anti-smoking advertisements from Ireland and abroad as well as 6 actual boxes of cigarettes, which depicted pictures on the packets showing the effects of smoking. Telephone interviews were also held with six leading public health experts/social marketing experts in Ireland and the UK, in the area of tobacco control.

Public service announcements should contain physical threat appeals which deal with the physical, visual appearance of the smoker as this study has highlighted that these were the most effective, at potentially initiating behaviour change among this target group. Images of rotting lungs and clogged arteries were less effective as a deterrent for smoking. This age group valued their appearance and thus images of rotting gums and teeth, yellowing teeth and bad skin as a result of smoking were more effective at prevention efforts. Packaging on the cigarettes was found to be a key promotional vehicle for health messages. Policy makers are increasingly valuing packaging by placing more graphic images on packets or avoiding all brand references and opting for plain packaging. An integrated marketing campaign should be initiated to reinforce this message, with images on packets of cigarettes of the physical, cosmetic effects of smoking. Price increases do not necessarily reduce demand among this age group as adolescents share their cigarettes and the powerful addictive effect of the cigarettes begins to take hold. Smoking has become a peer bonding exercise and has less to do with peer pressure. High-sensation seeking individuals congregate and share cigarettes and alcohol at certain agreed locations; this has to be incorporated into the design of public service announcements.

References available upon request