Relationships Can Disappear in a Puff of Smoke: a Test of Terror Management Theory and Risk Perceptions on Smoking Behavior

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We continue to be plagued with the problem of creating communications which can increase the probability of complying with risk information. An experiment investigated the impact of mortality salience and self-esteem on whether college-age will comply with anti-smoking messages focused on either health effects or social disapproval themes. We observe that social exclusion messages are particularly effective in reducing intentions to smoke for young smokers who derive their self-esteem in part from smoking. Overall, we find that mortality salience (e.g., health effects or social disapproval appeals) interacts with self esteem to influence the probability of smoking in the short run. The theoretical and public policy implications are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
In old Hollywood movies, it is difficult to avoid a recurring scene in which the condemned man is granted a last wish, which more often than not turns out to be a “final cigarette”. Although we all know that cigarette smoking is “hazardous to your health”, when staring mortality in the face, who can blame the smoker when he/ she takes a last long puff and exhales into eternity. When death is made salient, consumers react in ways designed to manage the terror brought about by that realization, which is the essence of Terror Management Theory (Goldenberg, et al. 2000). According to the theory, in reaction to the terror, the individual engages in psychological defenses which function as a means by which one can obtain and maintain a sense of self-esteem within their meaning system. In short, they behave in ways which enhance their self-esteem and reaffirm the vibrancy of their life. Hence, anti-smoking ads which make the risks of negative health effects prominent, may simply serve to motivate individuals, who derive their self-esteem from smoking, to continue smoking. This can and has been found to result in a boomerang or “Forbidden Fruit” effect by increasing smoking behavior, which is of course, at odds with the original intention of the advertisement. Clearly another approach is needed in an effort to convince smokers not to smoke.

We believe that Terror Management Theory, may hold the key to providing the theoretical rationale for the effectiveness of an anti-smoking campaign which makes salient “social disapproval” mortality as opposed to “physical” mortality, since young adults aged 18-24 years old may be of the opinion that the risks of health effects to smoking lie on a distant time horizon to which they are relatively immune. Indeed, a “social disapproval” mortality approach to an anti-smoking campaign may be found to be more effective in general, than emphasizing health effects for smokers of all ages, particularly if the optimism bias is widespread across demographic age groups.

In this research, we investigate the impact of mortality salience and smoking self-esteem on whether college-age smokers will comply with anti-smoking messages and the impact of those messages on health risk perceptions. For those who in part, derive their self-esteem from smoking, feeling good about oneself is a crucial way for such individuals to feel secure and protected from anxiety and in the extreme, serves to insulate them from an awareness of the potentially negative health consequences of the behavior and their susceptibility to these consequences. However, the derivation of self esteem through smoking may make such individuals susceptible to a campaign highlighting when smoking lie on a distant time horizon to which they are relatively immune. Indeed, a “social disapproval” mortality approach to an anti-smoking campaign may be found to be more effective in general, than emphasizing health effects for smokers of all ages, particularly if the optimism bias is widespread across demographic age groups.

In this research, we investigate the impact of mortality salience and smoking self-esteem on whether college-age smokers will comply with anti-smoking messages and the impact of those messages on health risk perceptions. For those who in part, derive their self-esteem from smoking, feeling good about oneself is a crucial way for such individuals to feel secure and protected from anxiety and in the extreme, serves to insulate them from an awareness of the potentially negative health consequences of the behavior and their susceptibility to these consequences. However, the derivation of self esteem through smoking may make such individuals susceptible to a campaign highlighting when smoking can lead to negative social consequences. Hence, we predicted an interaction between mortality salience and smoking self esteem. In addition, we investigate the influence that mortality salience and smoking self esteem has on smokers’ perceptions of the health risks–both to themselves and to others around them.

To test the hypotheses, 137 college-age smokers participated in this study. The methodology followed the process used in TMT research (Pyszczynski, et al. 2004). Participants viewed two anti-smoking messages and then completed the smoking self-esteem scale. The two messages were focused either on health effects or on the social disapproval related to smoking. The PANAS-X scale was administered to determine if negative affect was confounding the results. This was followed by a distracter task unrelated to the research question and then the dependent measures of behavioral intention to quit smoking and health risk measures were taken. The entire experiment was conducted in an online environment. The results show no significant effects of fear arousal or affect on the anti-smoking messages, thus providing support for mortality salience.

A set of 2x2 ANOVAs with planned contrasts was conducted to investigate the impact of self-esteem (high versus low smoking self-esteem) and mortality salience (health versus social mortality) on behavioral intent among college age smokers. Results revealed a main effect for mortality salience (F1,133=28.02, p<.0001) and a marginal effect for Smoking Self Esteem (F1,133=3.58, p<.06) as well as a significant interaction effect (F1,133=4.32, p<.04).

A pair of 2x2 ANOVAs was run to determine the impact of self-esteem and mortality salience on risk perceptions among smokers both for themselves and others. The results of the ANOVA for the health risk measure, revealed a significant main effect for mortality salience (F1,133=11.27, p<.001) for the risk perceptions linked to the smoker. That is, those individuals who viewed the social mortality message perceived the risk of smoking to their health as significantly higher than those who saw the health effects message (M=5.4 vs. M=3.4). We also investigated the risk perceptions of participants related to others in the form of second hand smoke in a 2x2 ANOVA format which again revealed a significant main effect for mortality salience (F1,133=16.71, p<.0001). That is, those individuals who viewed the social mortality message perceived the risk of smoking to others in the form of second hand smoke as significantly higher than those who saw the health effects message (M=4.60 vs. M=3.84, F1,133=16.71, p<.0001). There was no significant smoking self esteem main effect (M=4.10 v. 4.33, F1,133=1.60, n.s.).

Overall, we found that advocating social norms is more effective compared to advocating health effects messages for smoking behaviors. We also found that focusing on the interaction between self-esteem and different thematic approaches has an impact on whether smokers will consider reducing their smoking behavior. The implications of these findings are that attention should be paid to the manner in which anti-smoking messages are positioned to increase the probability of compliance with these types of messages. We also see that by using a health effects message, public policy and consumer behavior researchers are actually increasing the probability of noncompliance among college-age smokers. This research provides an extension of TMT research into the arena of using actual death-related visual images such as anti-smoking messages. In this study, actual PSAs were used to test the impact of mortality salient messages compared to esteem-enhancing messages as a means to communicate risks concerning smoking.

REFERENCES


