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Cigarette Initiation among Chinese Male Teenagers in Early Smoking Interactions

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Abstract

To collect in-depth information regarding cigarette initiation interactions in the early smoking experimentation among male youth in China, twenty focus groups with male teenagers ($N=165$) were conducted. Focus group discussions indicated a high prevalence of cigarette initiation among peers, and such initiation often translated into immediate smoking. Of the identified cigarette initiation appeals, “face” and normative pressure appeals were the most difficult to reject. Upon first initiation attempts, more teenagers accepted cigarettes than rejected them. The reasons behind both cigarette initiation and acceptance primarily related to facilitating social interaction. Upon being rejected, initiating teenagers (agents) who insisted on offering cigarettes often gained compliance. Profiles of peer agents were constructed in this study. Key practical implications suggest simultaneously prioritizing efforts to reduce cigarette initiation and encouraging cigarette refusal.

Keywords: cigarette initiation, Chinese male teenagers, early smoking, focus groups

Smoking contributes to one-third of all cancer deaths among men in China (Wang, Jiang, Wei, Yang, Qiao, & Boffetta, 2010). Despite the life-threatening consequences of tobacco use, more than half of the general male population in China smoke regularly (Chen, Gong, Li, Zhou, & Yan, 2014), while only 2.7% of the female population smoke (Chinese Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Approximately 85% of current Chinese smokers report initial experimentation with tobacco use during adolescence (Cai et al., 2012). Such smoking experimentation positively predicts later smoking behaviors among men (Huang et al., 2013). Thus, effective smoking prevention must begin in adolescence particularly targeting male youth. Researchers (Mao, Yang, Bottorff, & Sarbit, 2014) point to cigarette initiation (offering cigarettes) as a main cause for smoking onset, as well as heavier experimentation, greater cigarette intake, sustained unhealthy smoking habits, and cessation difficulties.

Our literature search of multiple databases revealed that cigarette initiation was investigated mostly with Chinese samples (see many of the cited studies in the current report); whereas, studies with non-Chinese samples often examined sources of first cigarettes and peer influences in general but not specifically cigarette initiation (Tanski, Stoolmiller, Gerrard, & Sargent, 2012). Further, cigarette initiation, often included as a variable but not as a focus (i.e., respondents typically were asked whether they had been offered cigarettes), was examined in mostly quantitative surveys (e.g., Tian, Qian, Zhang, & Zhang, 2006). The lone in-depth qualitative study (Hu, Rich, Luo, & Xiao, 2012) on cigarette sharing and gifting used a rural Chinese adult sample. Despite the strong belief that cigarette initiation among youth sustains smoking experimentation, which leads to tobacco addiction (Mao et al., 2014), zero published in-depth, qualitative studies have been devoted to youth cigarette initiation. Consequently, triggers, reasons, and behaviors in youth cigarette initiation interactions are largely unexamined.

Thus, to offer insight into smoking prevention, we conducted this focus group study to examine in-depth cigarette initiation processes among male teenagers during early smoking experimentation. We attempted to discover primarily (a) communication appeals used for cigarette initiation, (b) reasons for cigarette initiation, and (c) reactions toward cigarette initiation. The findings were intended to provide realistic contextual information and content for developing antismoking intervention messages/programs and establish some ground work for future evaluation research.

Consistent with the literature, we define cigarette initiation/passing as a process in which an agent offers a cigarette(s) to a target(s) with the expectation that the target(s) would smoke the cigarette immediately. From a communication perspective, we conceptualize cigarette initiation as an interpersonal influence process, in which an agent initiates cigarette smoking with a target. In that process, the agent may use some persuasion in order to get the target to smoke, and the target may accept or reject. In the case of rejection, the agent may drop the invitation or may insist that the target smoke the cigarette. We set out to gain insight regarding the process of cigarette initiation among male youth by reviewing relevant literature first and then posing research questions.

Cigarette Initiation among Youth

Cigarette initiation, offering cigarettes to others, has been examined as an established norm in the lives of Chinese male adults (Hu, Rich, Luo, & Xiao, 2012). Growing up in social interactions with adults, children likely observe, learn, and model adult behaviors (Jackson & Dickinson, 2009). Cigarette initiation as a normative behavior among adults influences the way in which youth interact among themselves (Cheng, 1999).

Although cigarette initiation and sharing has been well established as a prevalent social norm, little empirical research has been conducted to examine specific cigarette initiation behaviors among male teenagers and the circumstances surrounding cigarette

initiation. Without conducting empirical studies, researchers widely believe that cigarette initiation among youth exacerbates smoking experimentation (Huang et al., 2013). The act of offering cigarettes among teenagers in China appears to be quite popular as such acts could be viewed as expressing good will and wanting to develop friendships (Cui, Ying, & Fan, 2012). With a question specifically on cigarette initiation, a survey in six cities in China revealed that 21% of middle school students had been offered cigarettes by peers (Tian et al., 2006). In a preliminary survey with 661 vocational school and junior college male students (Sheer, 2013), 78% of the respondents experienced cigarette initiation as both initiation agents and targets, only as targets, or only as agents. Mao and colleagues (2009) discovered that their college student respondents felt a sense of obligation to offer cigarettes to those who gave them cigarettes earlier, which could further exacerbate cigarette initiation.

Frequent cigarette offers can increase cigarette availability for experimenters and even exert pressure for nonsmokers to conform (Huang et al., 2013). Yang, Ma, Chen, Brown, Taylor, and Samet (2004) reported that adolescents obtained their first cigarettes from friends possibly due to peer cigarette initiation. From their survey findings of 805 Hong Kong secondary students, Loke and Mak (2013) concluded that friends' invitation to smoke was a main contributor to adolescent smoking onset, and as adolescents gradually picked up smoking habits, they engaged in more mutual cigarette initiation with peers, which sustained smoking behavior and resulted in difficulties with smoking cessation. This conclusion echoed the belief by Turner, Gorden, and Young (2004) that cigarette initiation among teenagers could arouse interest in smoking, induce earlier smoking onset, and cause future nicotine dependence.

Reasons and Functions for Cigarette Initiation

Our literature review, which mostly included available research with adult samples, yielded three main categories of reasons for cigarette initiation: social interaction functions,

desirable social images, and utilitarian needs. *First*, a number of researchers (e.g., Rich & Xiao, 2012; Tu, Walsh, Tseng, & Thompson, 2000) assert that cigarette initiation serves everyday social interaction functions because offering cigarettes among men, smokers and nonsmokers, create a friendly atmosphere that facilitates social interaction. Ma et al. (2008) discovered that exchanging cigarettes among men serves as a way to break down social barriers, foster friendships, and promote bonding. Offering cigarettes among strangers, acquaintances, and friends is viewed as an expected etiquette, and rejecting such offers is considered impolite and disrespectful (Mao et al., 2014).

Second, cigarette initiation is associated with certain desirable social images. Offering cigarettes is a welcomed hospitality (Hu et al., 2012; Ma et al., 2008). A sense of trust and brotherhood can be shown and extended from one person to another through the sharing of cigarettes (Hu et al., 2012). Those who offer cigarettes of expensive brands are considered to be well-to-do or in a better economic class. Offering cigarettes of good brands sometimes gives the impression of being generous (Tu et al., 2000).

Third, cigarette initiation and sharing serve utilitarian functions, that is, the use of cigarettes in exchange for small favors, tangible goods and/or services. Offering cigarettes to acquaintances or people whom one has recently met can signal an intention to establish *gaunxi*, characterized by future mutual exchanges of personal favors (Pan & Hu, 2008). In the workplace, before asking for job-related favors, an employee may hand a cigarette to a superior (Cheng, 1999). Sometimes, when asking a stranger for directions when lost, a driver may hand a cigarette to the stranger to ensure that he/she would be motivated to provide accurate directions (Hu et al., 2012). Clearly, these utilitarian functions of cigarette initiation are understood implicitly in Chinese culture (see Rich & Xiao, 2012). Overall, our literature review yielded few negative perceptions of cigarette initiation.

Reactions to Cigarette Initiation

Researchers (e.g., Wang et al., 2014) believe that cigarette initiation is likely met with acceptance because of its positive social functions. When offered cigarettes, people who perceive rejection as a violation of social etiquette will likely accept such offers (Han, Chen, & Chen 2011). Mao et al. (2009) reported that 61% of the male college students in their sample expressed the belief that rejecting a cigarette offer was impolite, and those who received cigarettes should reciprocate such offers then or later. Loke and Mak (2013) found that 4% of nonsmokers and 49% of daily smokers in their sample indicated that they would accept cigarettes offered by their friends; however, the authors did not examine actual reactions to cigarette initiation. Tian et al. (2006) reported that 30% of the students in their sample accepted cigarettes from their peers. Scholars have attributed teenagers' susceptibility to friends' cigarette initiation to their lack of refusal skills (e.g., Ma et al., 2008). To summarize, researchers believe that cigarette initiation is often considered to be acceptable among adults and that teenagers are likely susceptible to cigarette offers as well. However, no further descriptions have been provided regarding how teenagers react to cigarette initiation.

Research Questions

Five research questions were posed to uncover the interpersonal dynamics of peer cigarette initiation processes in early smoking interactions. Consistent with its use in the literature (e.g., Huang et al., 2013), early smoking refers to smoking experimentation behaviors and interactions that individuals exhibit before they become regular or addicted smokers. These five research questions are as follows:

RQ1. What appeals do male teenage agents use to get their peer targets to accept cigarette initiation in early smoking interactions?

RQ2. What are the motivations or reasons behind male teenage agents' cigarette initiation in early smoking interactions?

RQ3. What reactions do targets exhibit upon peer agents' cigarette initiation in early

smoking interactions?

RQ4. What are the reasons behind teenage targets' reactions to cigarette initiation in early smoking interactions?

RQ5. When their first cigarette initiation attempts are rejected, what smoking insistence appeals (if any) do peer agents use in early smoking interactions?

Little available literature on cigarette initiation appeals warranted the generation of categories based on data rather than deductively derived categories (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). We adopted the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999) to guide our research design and analysis. Based in symbolic interactionism, grounded theory provides a method that progressively identifies and integrates categories of meaning from data, that is, teenagers' accounts of early cigarette initiation/smoking interactions.

Methods

Participants

Two cities, Tai Yuan, Shanxi Province (central) and Guangzhou, Guan Dong Province (southern coastal), were included in this study. We targeted male youth in vocational schools and junior colleges as such schools often reported higher smoking incidence than ordinary high schools (Chen et al., 2014). With the approval of the Committee on the Use of Human & Animal Subjects in Teaching & Research at our university, we sent a brief screening questionnaire to our mainland Chinese contacts, who evenly distributed 700 copies of that questionnaire to male students in the 10 participating schools with five in each city. From the 650 completed questionnaires, we formed a pool of potential focus group participants who reported remembering their experiences with first cigarette offers, provided some description of the venue, the people, and/or the occasion, and were willing to participate in focus group discussions. We then randomly selected 10 participants per group and two groups per school, but ultimately 7-10 available male teenagers per group were included at the time of the focus

group discussions.

Our final sample size reached 165 individuals in 20 focus groups. These participants were 15 to 21 years old ($M = 17.82$), consisting of 24.8% self-identified daily smokers, 14.5% regular smokers, 19.4% occasional smokers, 23% mostly nonsmokers, and 18.2% never smokers. They reported receiving first cigarettes at a mean age of 14.65 years, when they were in primary school or prior (12.1%), middle school (36.4%), high school (37.6%), and after high school (13.9%). Approximately twenty-seven percent (i.e., 27.3%) reported that neither parent smoked; 70.3% reported that only father smoked; 1.2% reported that both parents smoked, and 1.2% said unsure. Thirty-nine percent of participants, mostly nonsmokers, reportedly never or almost never offered cigarettes to others, and 61.2% had initiated cigarettes to others occasionally, sometimes, or frequently. Participants reported that 91.0% of the cigarette initiators were peers (friends, schoolmates, cousins, and strangers of similar ages), and 9.0% were parents, older relatives, friends of parents, and older strangers. This clearly lent support to our decision to focus our research efforts on peer smoking initiation processes.

Focus Group Protocol

A protocol was designed to maintain consistency when conducting the focus groups. The protocol consisted of three main themes for the larger research project: (1) smoking onset, (2) cigarette initiation processes, appeals, methods, and meanings, and (3) smoking resistance occasions, strategies, and barriers. For each theme, 3-5 main questions were asked, followed by probes and contingency questions. We tested the initial protocol in Hong Kong with a pilot focus group of 5 male college freshmen who had recently arrived from mainland China. Their feedback enabled us to make improvements to our protocol. The present paper reports data for the theme of cigarette initiation. A series of questions (illustrated below) were asked, and contingency questions and follow-up questions (in parentheses) were posed when

necessary.

Q1. Recall and describe occasions in which other(s) offered your first cigarettes. (Who offered you the cigarette? What did he say and do? Were other people present? . . .)

Q2. Why did they offer cigarettes to you? (To be polite? To ask for a favor? . . .)

Q3. What were your reactions to cigarette initiation? (Accepted? Rejected? What were you thinking? . . .)

Q4. What occurred when you rejected the cigarette offer? (Did the initiation agent drop the request? Or did he insist that you smoke it? . . .)

Focus Group Procedures

To maintain consistency, one experienced moderator in her early 20s conducted all focus groups. An assistant was hired for logistical purposes (e.g., arranging seating, handing out questionnaires, and distributing cash payments). Focus group sessions were conducted in a conference room at each participating school. Prior to each group, all participants read an informed consent form and completed a short survey that recorded their demographics, smoking status, and experience with smoking initiation, and each participant was assigned a code name (1 through 10). Before the group began, the moderator read the informed consent policy and allowed participants to leave willingly. All focus groups were audio-recorded. The moderator vocalized each participant's code name (e.g., "How did you feel, Number 2?") to mark his response on the audio tape and took notes during and immediately after the group. She opened each group session by introducing the topics and assuring participants that there were no correct or incorrect comments. She then used open-ended questions as much as possible, probed further when necessary, and minimized interruptions to obtain rich contextual information about teenage smoking. The focus group interviews lasted 70-90 minutes each. Each participant was paid 120 RMB (approximately 19 USD) immediately after a group session ended. All sessions were transcribed verbatim in Chinese with timing

markers for later retrieval.

Coding

The transcribed responses to all main questions on cigarette initiation, follow-up probes, and clearinghouse questions were included as the data corpus for the present study. We followed the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999) and coding techniques (Saldana's, 2013) to code the data. Our semi-structured focus group data with multiple participants particularly warranted a structured coding scheme. To develop such a scheme, the principal investigator (PI) wrote analytic memos while reading the data corpus carefully and listened to the digital recordings for necessary clarifications. Guided by the research questions, the PI took into consideration the reviewed literature, the analytical memos, and her previous knowledge and experiences and used constant comparisons to create an initial hierarchical coding scheme. This coding scheme consisted of first-level codes, second-level subcodes, and "other" categories that may have required a second round of coding. Using the initial coding scheme, the PI performed a trial run with approximately 20% of the data and made a few adjustments (e.g., creating new codes and grouping existing codes). The revised scheme was used to code the data.

The data corpus was loaded into the MAXQDA system, a qualitative data analysis program. Two research assistants were trained to independently code the data using the revised coding scheme. Coding was essentially a process of highlighting relevant text and assigning a code to the text. The PI instructed the two assistants that a datum (i.e., unit) of a code needed to include the key word(s) *and* available additional text that provided a complete meaning to help the researchers make sense of the data. For example, for the subcode, "to begin a friendship" under "reasons for accepting cigarette initiation," a datum would include "That's because he (agent) wanted to befriend me . . . he had good intentions . . . I felt that I

should not have rejected him” rather than “to befriend me.” Each coder wrote her own analytical memos particularly for texts that did not appear to fit a code or seemed ambiguous.

After the first round of coding, MAXQDA generated inter-coder agreements of 90% and above, indicating that the coding scheme was largely stable. To resolve discrepancies, the two coders first cleaned up clerical errors, compared each other’s analytical memos and then explained to each other their reasoning behind their coding decisions. At that point, most of the discrepancies were resolved. The PI examined the remaining few discrepancies and made the final coding decisions. Guided by the same principles used in the first round, a second round of coding was conducted for emerging codes (e.g., characteristics of agent profile). In addition to the qualitative analysis, we used MAXQDA’s basic statistical capabilities to tally the frequencies of subcodes based on unique mentions by individual participants. To explain, if a participant reported the same reason for cigarette initiation at two different times, the mention of the reason was counted once; if a participant mentioned two different reasons, each reason was counted once.

Results

We initially asked participants to recall their first cigarette initiation/smoking occasions. In reality, participants reported early cigarette interactions that included but were not limited to their experiences in first contacting cigarettes.

Profiles of Peer Agents

From the participants’ accounts, two main categories of peer initiation agents emerged. The friend agent (not a classmate), often in the same age group as the target, was one or two years older, lived close to the target, and spent most of his leisure time with or hung out with the target doing activities such as playing basketball, going to internet cafés, partying, playing poker, and passing the time in places near their homes. Sometimes the agent and the target had known each other since they were very young and had grown up together,

or they knew each other from school and developed a friendship after graduating. The classmate-friend agent attended classes or sometimes lived in the same dorm as the target; they interacted with each other in the classroom, used the same restrooms, spent breaks between classes together, had fun on campus, met up after school, and attended some social events together. In addition, older siblings and cousins with whom the targets spent time after dinner and at family reunions and gatherings offered cigarettes to the targets. Finally, acquaintances, friends' friends, and even strangers of similar ages offered cigarettes to the targets at large parties.

Cigarette Initiation Appeals in Initial Attempts (RQ1)

The most frequently mentioned type of cigarette initiation was direct action without words ($n = 74$). Peer agents who were already smoking (i.e., light, occasional, or regular smokers) simply handed cigarettes to the targets. In many cases, the agent who felt compelled to smoke gave a cigarette to a peer as a courteous, routine act without asking whether the target wanted to smoke. In some cases, the target walked up to the agent who was smoking at that moment, and the agent pulled out a cigarette to offer it to the target. Sometimes, the agent tossed cigarettes to everybody at a social gathering without knowing all of the people, or the agent demonstratively left a cigarette pack on the table where friends were seated. At other times, the agent held up a pack to one person after another for them to pick out a cigarette. In a few instances, the agent handed a cigarette to a target *and* turned on a lighter to light it. In three cases, when the target finished the cigarette, the agent quickly gave him another, resulting in chain smoking. In those cases, most targets were just beginning to experiment with smoking while the agents were more experienced in smoking. Direct actions without words often occurred in informal, social interactions (e.g., having fun together, passing the time after school, and partying). In dyadic situations, the agent and the target often knew each other as friends, relatives (e.g., cousins), or acquaintances (e.g., "somebody I often saw at

school”). In group social gatherings, the agent and the target sometimes did not even know each other. In addition to offering cigarettes via direct action, initiation agents reportedly used initiation appeals to get peers to smoke. In total, we discovered eight types of smoking initiation appeals (below).

Direct suggestions. ($n = 39$). Thirty-nine participants recalled that their friends used simple suggestions when offering cigarettes to them (e.g., “Have a cigarette,” “Let’s smoke,” and “Let’s smoke together”). The agents typically were early smokers who were not yet addicted to smoking, while the targets were nonsmokers or were beginning to experiment with cigarettes. The initiation occurred mostly in dyads (e.g., two individuals walking home together after school) and sometimes at group gatherings (e.g., parties). The agents and the targets were friends or acquaintances.

Polite inquiry ($n = 40$). In offering cigarettes, some agents used polite inquiries that gave the target an opportunity to turn down the offer. These polite inquiries appeared to be quite similar: “Try one?” or “Would you like a cigarette?” Interestingly, these agents never attempted to check the target’s smoking status first. Instead, the agents merely asked whether the target wanted to smoke at that moment. Polite inquiries were most frequently used in interpersonal interactions in which the agent was a relatively more experienced smoker than the target, and the two did not know each other well. No chain-smoking offers were reported when polite inquiries were used.

Utility functions ($n = 11$). For utility function appeals, the agent said, “Are you tired? Let’s take a blow (i.e., cigarette break),” “Have a cigarette. It makes you feel heavenly,” or “I know you are bored. Take it (cigarette).” These appeals, which were limited to only a few variations, were used between two friends who already had some experience with smoking.

Product novelty ($n = 15$). Peer agents offered cigarettes to targets by appealing to the novelty of product’s characteristics (e.g., “This is a good brand,” and “Have you smoked this

foreign brand before?”). Any novel cigarette attributes, such as being extra-long, expensive, rare, or of a foreign brand, triggered interest in smoking. One participant gave this account: “My buddy called me up and met me at a supermarket. He showed me an expensive-looking box with only 6 cigarettes in it. Instantly I knew this was a rare elite brand. We finished all six cigarettes.” Product novelty initiation was used exclusively among very good friends.

Desirable social image ($n = 15$). Participants revealed that their peers enticed them to smoke by calling attention to the desirable social image of being cool and rebellious. Those agents who were often a year or two older than their targets stated, “Men who don’t smoke are not real men,” “Take one, little bro. Smoke and act like a man,” or “If you want to attract girls’ attention, you need to look cool and smoke.” Social image appeals were used in both dyadic and small group situations and the smoking agent and the nonsmoking target were either friends or acquaintances.

Face/Respect ($n = 10$). Face (*mainzi*) in Chinese culture typically refers to a person’s social reputation, respect, prestige, and identity; face is so important that individuals strive hard to protect it (Leung & Chan, 2001). Face appeals used for smoking initiation included, “You are not giving me face if you turn me down” and “If you give face, you’ll smoke it. If you don’t want to give me face, you don’t have to take it.” From the context, we discovered that these appeals were expressed during interpersonal and group interactions, when the agent and target knew each other well as friends or classmates, and when the targets were nonsmokers.

Normative pressure ($n = 17$). Teenage agents sometimes resorted to peer norms in an effort to persuade targets to smoke with them. They stated, “You see, all of us are smoking. You need to join us” or “You can’t be the only one who doesn’t smoke here.” In four cases, giving face was stressed along with normative persuasion. According to one participant, adding the face appeal was extremely effective at getting the target to smoke. Normative

pressure was used exclusively in group interactions in which the agent and the target knew each other well, and the target was unwilling to smoke.

Downplaying targets' concerns ($n = 7$). Peer agents anticipated and downplayed the target's concerns by saying, "Smoking one cigarette won't hurt you," "Don't worry about it. Your girlfriend is not here," "Smoke one. This is not the kind of cigarette that will get you addicted," or "When you inhale, you will cough a little. This is normal. You will get used to it." This type of initiation interaction occurred often between a smoking agent and a nonsmoking target in interpersonal and group situations.

Agents' Reasons for First Initiation Attempts (RQ2)

The focus group moderator encouraged those participants who had offered cigarettes to peers to explain why they did so in the first place. Seven reasons emerged.

To be polite ($n = 8$). Some agents said they gave cigarettes just to be polite or nice (i.e., without giving much thought to social expectations).

To begin friendships ($n = 6$). Agents gave cigarettes to build rapport with peers whom the agents did not know. A participant who was an occasional smoker stated, "I just met this guy. He looked pretty approachable. I gave him a cigarette and began talking with him."

To maintain friendships ($n = 16$). Agents offered cigarettes sometimes as a gesture of reciprocity with smoking buddies who offered cigarettes previously and got nonsmokers involved at the same time.

To conform to interaction norms ($n = 20$). In mostly small or large group interactions (e.g., parties, games, and pastimes), the agents felt that they were expected to pass out cigarettes to others to enliven the social atmosphere. In dyadic encounters or when somebody was near the agent, he felt compelled to offer a cigarette as an expected courtesy before smoking one himself. A participant explained, "After we have lunch, we go back to

our dorm. The next thing we do is smoke together. I pass out cigarettes one day, and they do that other days. That's the way it is."

To serve special occasions ($n = 6$). Agents enumerated these special occasions in which passing out cigarettes was an inevitable routine: watching soccer games together and attending New Year's Day parties and fraternity ceremonies. A participant said, "Passing out cigarettes is a matter of ritual. When we (people of a clan) gather together, we smoke."

To usher into manhood ($n = 3$). Three agents offered cigarettes to younger, nonsmoking peers to usher them into manhood (e.g., "I gave them cigarettes because it's time to show these young guys how to grow up").

To tease friends ($n = 4$). The agents explained that they offered cigarettes to peers to tease them. A participant recalled this encounter: "I have a friend, and he did not smoke. I lit a cigarette for him . . . just wanted to see how he looked when he smoked. Yep, he coughed, looked pretty awful."

To feel a sense of achievement ($n = 4$). These agents acknowledged a sense of achievement in getting a nonsmoker to smoke. One participant explained, "I took pride in enlarging our army of smokers." Another stated, "I achieved something when I guided a nonsmoker to smoke like a pro."

Targets' Reactions to First Initiation (RQ3)

Upon receiving a cigarette offer, targets reportedly reacted in these four ways. First, they accepted the cigarette and smoked it readily or immediately ($n = 71$) without much thought, regardless of whether the agent used any persuasion. Second, they accepted the cigarette but smoked it unwillingly ($n = 10$). These targets did not want to smoke but did it anyway because they needed to give the agent face when other people were present. Third, they accepted the cigarette but put it away without smoking it ($n = 9$). When the targets did not wish to smoke but also wanted to give the agent face, they accepted the cigarette and put

it in their pocket to either throw away or give to someone else later. Fourth, they resisted the cigarette offer ($n = 70$). Most of these targets politely said, “Thanks, but I don’t smoke” or “I really don’t smoke.”

Based on participant code names, MAXQDA retrieved their reported reactions to cigarette initiation in relation to their smoking status. We discovered that of the 71 participants who readily smoked the cigarette upon first initiation, 94.4% were smokers (with 50.7% regular and heavy smokers), and only 5.6% were nonsmokers. Of the 19 people who accepted the cigarette and smoked it reluctantly or put it away, 89.9% were smokers (including 33.3% regular and heavy smokers), and 10.1% were nonsmokers. Of the 70 participants who resisted first initiation but later accepted cigarettes upon the agents’ insistence, 70% were smokers (with 25.7% regular and heavy smokers), and 30% were nonsmokers. The reasons for resisting first cigarette initiation were quite straightforward, such as “I did not smoke,” “I did not enjoy smoking,” and “smoking was bad for my health.” However, the reasons for complying with first initiation appeared to be quite varied.

Targets’ Reasons for Accepting Initial Cigarette Initiation (RQ4)

Through two rounds of coding, we classified the reasons for accepting cigarette offers into seven main categories and several subcategories.

Social interaction motive. Targets accepted cigarettes to facilitate social interactions. From participants’ accounts, five subcategories of motives emerged. Building and maintaining friendships/connections were the most cited motives ($n = 40$). Targets indicated that rejecting a cigarette from someone whom they had just met or to whom they had just been introduced would hurt future interactions. They accepted cigarettes from friends to demonstrate trust in maintaining the relationship. Conforming to social norms ($n = 35$) was the second most cited motive. The targets believed that most of their friends viewed smoking as a positive behavior, their friends enjoyed smoking, and being with friends should involve

the act of smoking. Facilitating communication ($n = 25$) was also frequently mentioned. In dyadic encounters (often between two acquaintances), cigarette smoking served to fill conversational gaps so that neither felt embarrassed for not speaking. Giving face ($n = 16$) was mentioned as a reason for accepting cigarettes. Finally, being polite ($n = 5$) was mentioned as a reason for accepting cigarettes.

Curiosity ($n = 64$). Targets mentioned that they took the cigarette because they were curious about the taste ($n = 6$), how it felt physically ($n = 5$), the techniques of playful smoking ($n = 4$) (e.g., blowing smoke rings), and the entire smoking experience ($n = 49$).

Social image ($n = 44$). Targets indicated that smoking gave them a desirable social image such as “being cool,” “being a mature man,” “showing macho behavior,” and “being gregarious.”

Pleasurable functions ($n = 9$). Participants mentioned “to be stimulated,” “to be uplifted,” and “to experience smoke seeping through the lungs” as reasons for smoking the cigarette.

Coping with negative emotions ($n = 9$). At the time of the cigarette initiation, some participants were experiencing stress from school work, family issues, difficulty in peer relationships, or boredom from doing nothing. These targets accepted cigarette offers to lessen the effect of negative emotions.

Biased optimism ($n = 7$). Targets in this case had some reservations about smoking-related health consequences, but they claimed that trying one cigarette would not harm them or get them addicted.

Automatic acceptance ($n = 10$). Some participants claimed that they accepted cigarette offers without thinking anything and could not explain why they did it.

Smoking Insistence Appeals (RQ5)

Fifty-six participants (agents) reported that the targets resisted their initial cigarette

offers; half of them (agents) made no further attempts, while the remainder repeatedly offered cigarettes. Those who stopped further initiation provided a few explanations: “I did not want to force him,” “I didn’t want to embarrass someone who didn’t know how to smoke,” “It saved me a cigarette. I didn’t know him that well anyway,” and simply, “Fine with me.” Those who insisted that the target smoke the cigarette used a variety of insistence appeals. Similar to the first initiation appeals, some agents included using face, utility functions, image, and normative pressure, and downplaying targets’ concerns. The framing of these appeals appeared to be more negative than their initial initiation appeals. For example, face appeal was often negatively worded, “You really don’t want to give me face?” Several new appeals that emerged included product cost appeal (“I already bought the cigarettes. Don’t waste my money”), forceful insistence (“Take one anyway,” “Try one first and then decide if you like it”), bribing or teasing (“I will give you 10 RMB if you smoke it”), and justification (“It’s useless for you to be so concerned about smoking consequences. Yes, you might get cancer from smoking. However, even if you don’t smoke, you can still get cancer from secondhand smoke. Just enjoy it”), and demonstrating techniques to those who did not know how to smoke (“I’ll show you how to inhale,” “Watch me smoke. You will enjoy it in no time”).

In the context of smoking insistence, some participants additionally reported that the agents continued to offer them cigarettes after being rejected the second time. In those cases, twenty-seven participants accepted and smoked the cigarette; at the time of the focus group discussion, twenty-six of them had become regular smokers, and one had remained a nonsmoker. Eight participants rejected further initiation attempts. Taken together, of those who disclosed their reactions to smoking insistence, 56% accepted cigarette offers upon the first smoking initiation attempts, and 77% of those who resisted the first attempts accepted cigarette offers upon the second initiation attempts. Further, twelve participants who had

attempted to offer cigarettes the second time said they did not insist any further if rejected again. No participants said that they continued to offer cigarettes if met with repeated rejections.

Discussion

This study examined cigarette initiation in early smoking experimentation among male youth in China, yielding insight on cigarette initiation and smoking as dynamic interpersonal processes. Our discussion focuses on how the current findings can be used for antismoking communication and education.

Cigarette Initiation and Its Detriment to Health

The overall patterns of cigarette initiation indicated that a majority of teenage targets accepted cigarette offers upon first initiation attempts, and agent insistence led to acceptance by a vast majority of those who rejected first cigarette offers. Peer cigarette initiation was prevalent among male adolescents, and accepting cigarette initiation was highly associated with later smoking status. Specifically, 94.4% of those who reported readily accepting first cigarette offers were smokers at the time of our data collection. Accepting cigarettes with no resistance translated into immediate smoking, and the reciprocation of cigarette offers likely sustained smoking among the male youth. Thus, we conceptualize cigarette initiation as a key risky behavior in its own right, which antismoking interventions must target.

Diverging from existing smoking prevention strategies aimed at developing smoking refusal efficacy (Jackson, & Dickinson, 2009), we call for antismoking efforts to prioritize cigarette initiation. Reduced cigarette initiation not only lowers the need for refusal but mitigates the reasons for reciprocal cigarette sharing, thereby reducing overall cigarette intake among male youth. Further, our conceptualization of cigarette initiation as a dynamic interpersonal influence process points to a two-prong approach to smoking prevention. We consider both reducing cigarette initiation and encouraging cigarette refusal to be two viable,

complimentary aspects of smoking prevention.

Reducing Cigarette Initiation

Reducing cigarette initiation naturally lessens adolescents' pressure and opportunities to smoke, thereby decreasing smoking onset, eliminating the formation of the vicious cycle of reciprocal initiation, and lowering smoking addiction. Based on our findings on initiation motives, we recommend four strategies for reducing cigarette initiation. Our *first* strategy is dissuading teenagers from wanting to initiate cigarettes. The overwhelming reasons given by our participants (e.g., "to be polite" and "to begin and maintain friendships") pertain to voluntary social interaction needs. Specifically, initiation agents wished to gain social approval from peers and used cigarettes to facilitate social interaction but simultaneously worried about the negative social consequences of not offering cigarettes. In this study, we discovered that more than half of those who were offered cigarettes either accepted them reluctantly or turned them down. Prevention messages to male teenagers can emphasize that their peers dislike cigarette initiation and only accept cigarettes reluctantly. Similar messages can also be used to dissuade agents from insistently offering cigarettes.

Our *second* strategy is guiding teenagers to use alternatives to cigarettes for facilitating social interaction. Communication and social skills training builds teenagers' confidence. Content from smartphones, which teenagers often carry with them, can prompt some ideas for conversation that facilitate social interaction.

Our *third* strategy aims to brand the remaining initiation motives (i.e., to usher someone into manhood, to tease friends, and to feel a sense of achievement) as absurd, inconsiderate, and unacceptable to peers. These examples include, "friends don't tease friends with cigarettes" or "friends who care don't force friends to smoke."

Our *fourth* strategy is to strongly discourage teenagers from engaging in initiation insistence. Teenagers are informed that their peers dislike their insistence to smoke cigarettes

and that cigarette initiation insistence is a much more negatively perceived act than the initial initiation. If consistently implemented, these strategies can help build a new no-cigarette-offer interaction norm among male teenagers. However, this process of building new norms will take time; thus, smoking prevention programs can be designed to simultaneously encourage cigarette refusal.

Encouraging Cigarette Refusal

Our study identifies a few barriers associated with smoking rejection that teenagers must overcome. The first barrier stems from targets' prosocial interaction motives for accepting cigarettes and the implied social undesirability of refusing the offer. Thus, educators can help male teenagers rationalize smoking refusal as being justified rather than socially undesirable. Messages such as "you can still be friends without smoking cigarettes" or "the cost of face can be your health" can be developed to underscore the notion that cigarette refusal is justified. Our finding that half of the agents who were rejected made no further initiation attempts provides a basis for messages that instill confidence in teenagers by telling them that refusal likely is effective. Regarding initiation appeals for first attempts and later insistence, both agents and targets reported that the appeals that were most difficult to refuse were related to face. Health communication researchers and practitioners need to focus on developing effective refusal responses particularly to forceful offers. As a last resort, we recommend that teenagers facing forceful or repeated initiations accept the cigarettes and discard them later.

Limitations and Future Research

The space limit did not allow us to provide rich contextual information as thoroughly as we would have liked; we were also unable to include the voluminous findings on cigarette refusal tactics in this report. Consequently, only the most salient results were included in this report. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, we were unable to examine the reliability

and validity of the findings. Thus, in addition to being far from definitive, the current findings only provide a basis for designing follow-up quantitative studies and cannot be generalized to other settings. The typologies of cigarette initiation appeals for initial and later attempts offer insight on smoking negotiation communication. Presumably, “just say no” may work for weak initiation attempts, but forceful cigarette initiation particularly calls for attention in research. Nonetheless, all initiation appeals identified in this study can be tested for rejection difficulty. At the same time, each appeal can be used to solicit and develop resistance responses through empirical research. Culturally appropriate and effective initiation refusal responses can be identified and then used to train male teenagers, particularly at-risk youth, to resist future cigarette initiation.

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