Moderating Role of Parental Responsiveness in the Impact of Psychological Control on Youth Smoking: a Longitudinal Perspective

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Parental psychological control, as moderated by parental responsiveness, is shown to influence child smoking initiation and progression. An integrative multi-level model, using longitudinal data from children ages 10 through 17, demonstrates that parenting strategies’ impact on child smoking is partially mediated by changes in the child’s self-esteem trajectories and that the impact of psychological control is moderated by parental responsiveness. Psychological control increases child smoking development both directly and indirectly (via self-esteem) while parental responsiveness acts as a buffer in alleviating the detrimental effects of psychological control. Transformative consumer research implications are then developed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In public policy and marketing research, two parenting strategies—namely parental responsiveness and behavioral control—have long been regarded as two important inhibitors of consumer misbehavior among children and adolescents, such as credit card abuse (Palmer, Pinto, and Parente 2001), and risky sexual behavior (Tanner et al. 2008). Similarly, in the psychology and public health literatures, parental responsiveness and behavioral control are viewed as two important predictors of undesirable adolescent behaviors such as smoking cigarettes (Simons-Morton 2002; Tucker et al. 2003). These studies have yielded intriguing findings, but the impact of another key parenting strategy—psychological control—on child smoking initiation or progression is largely ignored. In addition, most studies on parenting-smoking linkages have mainly focused on the direct effect of parenting strategies on child smoking, ignoring their indirect effect through self-esteem. Exploring the role of self-esteem as the underlying mechanism through which parenting strategies affect child smoking may yield important new counter-marketing insights on how changing parenting strategies might be useful in avoiding or curbing youthful tobacco use.

This research intends to fill the gaps in the literature by developing an integrative model specifying that psychological control, and its interactions with parental responsiveness and behavioral control, drives self-esteem trajectories, which in turn drive smoking trajectories (initial level and slope). Self-esteem is the key focal mechanism because it is the single most important indicator of an individual’s social well-being. Kaplan’s (1982) self-degradation theory holds that adolescents low in self-esteem defend their egos by alienating themselves from conventional role models and rebelling against their standards. This leads to involvement with deviant peers and engaging in such delinquent behaviors as smoking, drinking, or taking illegal drugs. Because child self-esteem is influenced by extended interaction with parents (Hoelter and Harper 1987), we argue that psychological control influences child smoking development both directly and indirectly via influencing the changing pattern of child self-esteem.

We develop a series of latent growth modeling (LGM) analyses to examine the interactive impact of psychological control and other parenting strategies on self-esteem and smoking trajectories, using longitudinal data from ages 10 to 17. This coincides with transition to high school, puberty, and the development of an independent mature self-identity and ego. During this significant developmental period, self-esteem deteriorates over time and clearly has a negative slope (Blyth, Simmons and Carlton-Ford 1983; Simmons, Carlton-Ford, and Blyth 1987) through at least age 15. Correspondingly, smoking demonstrates a parallel but positive progression in frequency (Audrain-McGovern et al. 2004; Mayhew, Flay and Mott 2000).

To our knowledge, this research represents the first effort to examine the extent to which children’s smoking initiation and progression is influenced by psychological control, or the extent to which the impact of psychological control is moderated by the other two parenting factors. In addition, we are among the first to examine trajectory-to-trajectory influences of self-esteem on smoking, and show that the indirect effects of parenting, through self-esteem, are stronger and more insightful than the direct effects. From a public policy perspective, our findings suggest ways to improve the effectiveness of parent-oriented anti-smoking campaigns. Recent campaigns such as Tobacco Free Kids have recognized the importance of parenting by educating parents about conduct that is more likely to curtail teen smoking. Our findings suggest that the existing parent oriented anti-smoking campaigns have one major shortcoming. These campaigns have mainly focused on two parenting strategies—namely parental responsiveness and behavioral control—by emphasizing the importance of parental monitoring and open communication and problem solving discussions between parents and teenagers. In contrast, based on our findings, educating parents about the harmful effects of psychological control is even more important because psychologically controlling parenting can directly increase children’s adoption of smoking and indirectly increase their adoption and progression of smoking through influencing their self-esteem.

REFERENCES


