Interpretations of smoking in film by older teenagers

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Abstract

Research testifies that images of tobacco use in popular films are highly pervasive and typically glamorised. There are concerns that these images may promote motivations to smoke in adolescents, but little is known about how these images are interpreted by members of this age group. A qualitative study was conducted to explore how older teenagers interpret and decode smoking imagery in film. This study builds on earlier work with a younger age group (12 and 13 years) to explore how various interpretations of smoking imagery shape and support common understandings about smoking among older teenagers.

Data were collected through focus groups. Eighty-eight 16 and 17 year old students were interviewed at school. Participants discussed their recollections of and responses to recently viewed films. Older teens were receptive to smoking imagery when it was used in a credible manner to portray an emotional state, sub-culture affiliation, and lifestyle. Experience as a smoker appeared to inflate the credibility of realistic smoking images, particularly those presented in gritty realism/drama film. Older teens perceived realistic images, as opposed to stereotypical images, as a salient reference to their own lives. Stereotypical images were also readily recalled and appeared to perform an important role in supporting misconceptions about smoking and contributing to popular ideologies about tobacco use. Stereotypical images presented in comedy and action genre also serve to present paradoxical and contradictory messages about tobacco use. In particular, participants recalled tobacco use in film as associated with stress and anxiety, drug use, and seduction. Film images of tobacco use in specific contexts appear to hold specific and significant meanings for older teens. Realistic images offered salient representations of the perceived reality of smoking for this group. Pervasive and credible smoking scenes in film may offer support and reassurance to older teens who currently smoke or hold ambivalent views about smoking. Consistent with younger adolescents, older teens tended to draw upon their own experience with tobacco use when interpreting smoking images in film. In contrast with younger adolescent, older teens tend to draw upon their own experience with tobacco use when interpreting smoking images in film. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

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Introduction

Film depictions of tobacco have been popularised most notably since the rise of the movie star in the 1930s and 1940s (Shields, Carol, Balbach, & McGee, 1999; Stacey, 1994). During this period, images of Humphrey Bogart and other leading actors smoking were overtly glamorised, as were the growing number of feminine depictions (Escamilla, Cradock, & Kawachi, 2000; McIntosh, Bazzini, Smith, & Wayne, 1998). Tobacco companies appreciated the promotion that film stars afforded their product, as stars oozed sublime cool while drawing deeply on a cigarette. Today, after a brief decline in the use of tobacco in films during the 1970s and 1980s, the smoker has returned, this time to the multiplex cinema (Stockwell & Glantz, 1997). Tobacco use in film is now widely suspected to be highly pervasive and to have a specific youth appeal (Perry, 1999;
The tobacco industry appears to be highly motivated to recruit new smokers, and it possesses an impressive track record of deception in order to achieve this. Marketing of tobacco to young people through popular culture effectively sidestepped current legislation surrounding advertising (Macfadyen, Hastings, & Mackintosh, 2000; Hoek, 1999). It is generally suspected that the tobacco industry is responsible for the placement of cigarette smoking in films, and empirical investigations have attempted to determine how these images may influence the initiation of smoking in adolescents (Tickle, Sargent, Dalton, Beach, & Healhterton, 2001; Gibson & Maurer, 2000; Hines, Saris, & Throckmorton-Belzer, 2000). Although research has focused almost exclusively on the role of promotional activities in the initiation of smoking among young adolescents, the present study is conducted with a sample of older teens, for many of whom smoking is an already established behaviour. This paper builds upon a previous study of younger adolescents (12 and 13 years) by exploring a sample of older (16 and 17 years) adolescents' interpretations of smoking imagery in film (McCool, Cameron, & Petrie, 2001).

Social representation theory provides a framework for exploring adolescents' perceptions of smoking representations in film and how representations (for example, tobacco use) assist in shaping collective understandings about pervasive social realities. Social representation theory also addresses how social groups draw upon their own collective (lay) understandings to make sense of and embellish cinematic representations (Sommer, 1998). Media communications, which lie at the core of social representation theory, are understood to be critical to both the construction and diffusion of what is understood as a 'social representation'. Moreover, this framework primarily acknowledges the role of structural elements within media constructs, which may include the representational field (e.g. context, content, place), knowledge (e.g. quality and quantity of representations) and perceptions of the representation (Sommer, 1998). Rather than being universally ascribed, social representations relate to a central and accessible core of beliefs, which is determined or arranged according to 'group-specific' knowledge (Moscovici, 1983).

Although images of tobacco use may constitute a universal representation, the meanings attached to the images are likely to be determined according to group lifestyles, values, norms and identities (Sommer, 1998). In our previous study (McCool et al., 2001), for example, younger adolescents were found to perceive that glamorous, tough, and sexy smoker images are pervasive in film. However, despite the pervasiveness of these stereotyped images, scenes of smoking (especially in drama and action genre) were also regarded as realistic and accurate reflections of real life. Similarly, smoking (both in film and in real life) was perceived to be associated with stress relief, a marker of maturity and adult behaviour, and a symbol of self-image and cultural identity. These observations illustrate that meanings associated with tobacco images in film are shaped according to the viewer's own expectations and experiences with real life smoking. Moreover, these expectations and experiences are cultivated within the viewer's social and subgroup groups, which assist to define the subscribed lifestyles, norms, and identities.

Prevalent notions about sub-cultural identities and desirable or reliable images of smoker 'types' are critical in young peoples' appraisals of smoking imagery (Amos, Currie, Gray, & Elton, 1998; Amos, Gray, Currie, & Elton, 1997; Banwell & Young, 1993). It is anticipated that older teens' interpretations of smoking imagery may well be shaped by their common understandings about what is perceived to be credible and desirable within their own social worlds. Older teens represent a developmentally distinct group of adolescents; in relation to younger adolescents, their social parameters are more likely to offer greater independence, and autonomy. It is widely advocated that smoking is perceived by young people to be indicative of identity and the attainment of autonomy and independence (Amos & Cunningham-Burley, 1995; Banwell & Young, 1993; Perry, 1999). This theme did not emerge as a salient perception among the adolescents in our previous study, but it may become more predominant during later adolescence.

This study was developed to explore how older adolescents respond to smoking imagery presented in film and its meanings and relevance to their beliefs about smoking. Because of the dramatic developmental and social changes that occur over the course of adolescence, we cannot assume that observed patterns of interpretations made by younger adolescents are also common among older teens. In particular, it is important to explore the salience of smoking images for older teens who represent a group with relatively variable experiences with tobacco ('lifestyle', 'addiction', 'habit' and as an 'identity'). The study locates the issue of smoking and film viewing, and smoking in films as social activities, which are mediated by interpretations of cultural acceptability. The interpretative focus of this research was positioned predominantly with the audience or viewers' perceptions of smoking imagery in film. By privileging the audience's perceptions of smoking images in film, the perceived image is rendered as the representation, rather than the text itself.

The focus of the study is also on teenager's perceptions of 'incidental' smoking representations, rather than an assessment of tobacco product placement. Moreover, comparisons are made between the previous study with younger adolescents in order to illustrate the
convergent and divergent interpretations of smoking imagery in media.

**Procedure**

A grounded theory methodology using focus groups was developed to explore the meanings that the participants assigned to their interpretations of their everyday media experiences (Morse & Field, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A focus group method with a semi-structured interview format was used to collect textual data, enabling an analysis of current interpretations of smoking in film to be developed. The interviews were focused around a theme list that included the following themes: self-image, ideal image in popular culture, sub-culture affiliation and awareness, awareness of and interpretations of smoking imagery in film, symbolic significance of smoking imagery, attitudes towards the inclusion of smoking imagery, media analysis skills, media ‘immunity’, and perceived prevalence of smoking in real life. Each focus group was comprised of between six and eight students. Interviews lasted 40–50 min and were taped. Detailed field notes were taken during and shortly following the interviews. Transcripts were coded using a framework developed through an inductive analysis of recurrent themes (conceptual ideas and beliefs), expressions, and language. A thematic analysis of the interview data was conducted, whereby dominant, and idiosyncratic themes embedded within the text were identified through the coding process. The relationship between themes were then synthesised and contextualised in relation to the broader tobacco use and audience reception literature. An explanatory theory of these interpretations was subsequently developed.

**Schools**

Secondary schools were clustered according to their geographical location. Two schools within each of the four geographical locations were randomly selected and invited to participate in the study. Each school was purposefully selected to ensure that a range of decile ranked schools (based on socio-economic status) were included in the sample. Two interviews were arranged and conducted on the same day in each school, one interview with male students, and one with female students. The two schools that declined to take part in the study both cited the following reasons: resource constraints and staffing pressures within the school. One school did not recruit sufficient number of male students, therefore only one interview was conducted with a group of female students.

**Participants**

In total, 88 students were interviewed (41 male and 47 female). The average age of students was 16 years. The ethnic distribution of students included Maori (29%), Caucasian/European (41%), Pacific Islands (19%), and Asian (8%) and other ethnic groups (3%). Smoking status was not formally collected from participants but was volunteered through the interview. The minimum school leaving age in New Zealand is 15 years. Current minimum age for purchasing cigarettes in New Zealand is 18 years (Ministry of Health, 2000).

**Results**

It was evident that older teens were more likely to offer contrary views than were younger adolescents in the previous study, who tended to agree with normative views emerging from the group. Group-mediated responses are therefore presented throughout the results, except where an individual opinion represents the broader consensus, or an idiosyncratic opinion. Interviews were initiated by a general discussion of preference for personal style and social entertainment in order to allow for a logical introduction of the issues relating to smoking imagery in film. The following themes emerged in the discussions.

**Authenticity**

Older teenagers’ ‘experience’ with tobacco, either in use or through extensive film viewing, appeared to offer a particular vantage point from which to read film images. Above everything else, the authentic image was perceived to be the most salient and, therefore, the most notable image. However, consistent with the younger group, older teens were sharply aware of the patently constructed nature of mainstream film images. Images of smoking or tobacco that were inconsistent with expectation of the actor’s standard behaviour (e.g., typically a non-smoker) or character type (e.g., a conservative female) and actual film images were discussed. Moreover, images that also suggested self-consciousness about the smoking behaviour were identified as ‘unconvincing’. These included images that depicted smokers who were considered to be ‘faking’ the smoking performance, or performances that evidently were an awkward attempt to portray a specific and stylised character, type, or scene.

“i notice it [smoking]”

“I notice too, because like I was thinking this character, I was thinking like I know that she’s totally against it in real life this actress and then I saw
her in the movie and she was like smoking hard out…”

(Females, 16 years)

“Or you see some people smoking and you go “Oh, nah they’re not doing it properly”

(Females, 16 and 17 years)

“Half the time they don’t actually smoke, like in Practical Magic, we were commenting on it that one of the actresses… was sitting there and she always had a cigarette in her hand, but she never actually smoked it”

(Females, 16 and 17 years)

In this context, the credibility of the scene was challenged in the face of its perceived authenticity. The scenes described above alert attention to the smoking performance and how the cigarette was managed and used in a scene to provide some distraction. Interestingly, stereotyped images were often perceived as credible, despite being overtly stylised. The generic, yet stylised smoker was evident to the participants; this image is clearly recognisable and often faithful to the prescriptive formula of ‘a smoker’. Furthermore, smokers who were considered to be unattractive or blatantly uncool were noted, as if the image was more attune with the reality of smoking. In particular, females were more inclined than males to discuss these discrepancies (between image and expectation). Several female participant groups addressed this type of discrepancy as they shifted between discussing film and real life images of smokers.

“I definitely think that media puts a high priority on smoking though”

“Smoking and alcohol”

“I reckon tough guys like [it]…”

“To look staunch”

“They stub it out on their hands or something”

“It just looks stupid when little weeny guys who are bald do it”

(Female, 16 and 17 years)

Actors who do not usually smoke (in film or off screen) are effective in drawing attention to the cigarette, even if in a critical or self-conscious way. The extent to which these images are meaningful to the audience is variable. Among the groups, there was an awareness of smoking as a performance. Awkward smokers are readily identified as novice, still to develop poise in the smoking performance. When Bruce Willis or Christina Ricci, for example, are seen smoking on screen there is nothing unusual about it; it is a polished performance and consistent with expectations about their usual roles and their publicised, off-screen personalities.

Smoking as reality

Regardless of the awkwardness of a smoking performance, the mere presence of tobacco appears to remind the audience of the growing belief that smoking still is an established, affirmed ‘fact of life’; its evidence, on the street and in film, reflects this reality.

Participants generally perceived smoking to be just a normal part of life that was generally tolerated by most people. The majority of both smokers and non-smokers viewed smoking as normal and very common, both on screen and among peers. Within many interviews, discussion typically would draw upon common assumptions about smoking in the everyday context. The extent of real life smoking was estimated by the perceived prevalence of smoking among friends and, in some cases, among family members. Interestingly, estimates of peer smoking rates were pitched as high as 75–95%, when such rates seldom (if ever) exist in New Zealand society. New Zealand adult smoking rates remain steady at about 26% and, among young adults (15–24 years), 31% (Ministry of Health, 2000). In the following dialogue, a group of males discuss the normalcy of smoking in film. The dialogue reflects the perceived prevalence of smoking in real life:

“I don’t actually notice it eh, [because] it’s just like part of the norm for you at the moment.”

“Like cos all my mates smoke eh”

“I’m the only one that…”

 “[It’s] common”

“Pretty, pretty up there [common]”

(Males, 16 and 17 years)

“The majority [of people] I reckon”

“Yeah”

“Seventy to eighty”

“Eighty easy”

“Nah, I reckon it’s gone down eh”

“Girls are more”

(Females, 16 and 17 years)

“It’s an everyday part of life”

“It has become normal”

“You can basically safely say it is an every day part of life”
“You can go to any place in any city everywhere and you’ll always see people smoking”

(Males, 16 and 17 years)

A flippant and nonchalant attitude towards both real life smoking and film images of smoking was evident throughout the interviews. Moreover, smoking was broadly perceived as a minor issue among the competing priorities within the daily lives of participants. Juggling schools, study, work, a social life, and home life demands presented more immediate concerns, and for many participants this challenge created significant stress. Within the previous study, younger adolescents were grappling with issues associated with constructing a desired image, a process in which film and other media images appear to play an important role. Among these younger adolescents, smoking rates were comparatively lower and smoking knowledge was gleaned from older siblings and other adults. Among older teens in the present study, the relevant issues were associated with facing the reality of pending independence; thus smoking images in film were of less importance and interest.

Smoking imagery as a device

Consistent with the previous study of younger adolescents, older teens presented informed beliefs about the placement of smoking imagery in film. Two main reasons for the use of tobacco in film were suggested: (1) to enhance the believability of the image or to create a specific stylised image; and (2) to promote the product; that is, to enhance the commercial desirability of cigarettes by using actors to promote the product. Smoking was widely understood to be an effective strategy used by filmmakers to develop and enhance a character’s personality. Younger adolescents in the previous study also were acutely aware of the symbolic potency of the cigarette to create a character image, but they were less critical of the commercial advocacy role of using tobacco in film. The following comments reflect the awareness of commercial advocacy among the older teens.

“[They] are just advocating it”
“I don’t mind if it’s real”
(Males, 16 and 17 years)

“The smoking company paid them to smoke their smokes…”
“Just to make money”
“Advertising”
“If they advertise their cigarettes they make money out of it so…”

(Males, 16 and 17 years)

The role of tobacco in assisting to create an image was also strongly supported across the groups. Specifically, the following explanations were offered to validate the role of tobacco in film: to make the actors look more real, to give them something to do when they are not acting, and to create the right image such as sexy, tough, hard, or laid back. Several participants also agreed that the cigarette actually ‘creates them [the character],’ by enabling the personality of the character to emerge and by offering clues to the character’s lifestyle, social status, and cultural context.

“They’re trying to create the hard look”
“Going for style”
(Males, 16 and 17 years)

Cigarettes in film appeared to be entwined with images and contexts that address salient, core issues and values for this audience. Female representations in mainstream film were perceived to rarely deviate from the stereotyped ideal of sexual attractiveness, slimness, and emotional vulnerability. Images portraying the generic, Hollywood versions of youth, attractiveness, and sexuality in conjunction with smoking were discussed through the majority of the female group interviews. The following dialogue reflects a discussion by a group of females about the association between smoking and seduction, which was perceived as a pervasive element in popular films.

“I reckon it’s the ladies at the bars and stuff look good, you know, the real sultry ones that sit there with the tight dresses and bright red lipstick”
“And they’ve always got one of those little plastic things for them”
“They don’t just have a cigarette, they have a cigarette holder…”
“They look okay doing it”
“They always blow smoke in a man’s face”
“Seductive!!!!...It’s a seductive thing you know, the way they purse their lips around the butt of a cigarette and kind of suck it in and then…”
“Blow it out…”
“Where’s your red dress eh Missy?”
(Females, 16 and 17 years)

“The beautiful young people”
“The males”
“There is a whole range really”
“Action here sort of you know, he finishes having his way with this gorgeous lady and he jumps to his feet and sparks up afterward”

“And they walk around the house in their little towels after they’ve had sex and stuff and they’re all smoking”

“It’s the done thing you know—after you have sex you spark up a cigarette as a sign of satisfaction or something”

“Or you see a sultry young vixen sitting there in the bar…”

(Females, 16 and 17 years)

Several female groups also acknowledged the symbolic association between slimness and smoking. Specifically, conceptions regarding the appetite-inhibiting role of cigarettes were discussed during an interview with female students. In reference to the pervasive images of slim models and female stars, who smoke in films, the following discussion emerged.

“I know she is not an actress, but Kate Moss you always see the models smoking before they go on the runway and stuff, to stop their hunger pangs”

“I reckon skinny people are associated with smoking”

“I heard that, I heard that if you smoke right, you don’t get as hungry”

“So the more you smoke, the less you have to eat”

“It makes you think too, like you think ‘I wonder if I should just to lose a bit of weight’”

(Females, 16 and 17 years)

Emotional drama and tobacco use appears to be inextricably linked in film. Despite the often hyper-real images used in these contexts, smoking during times of stress or anxiety was widely considered to be realistic. Older teenagers recognised the association between tension and smoking as an appropriate method of expressing a normative reaction to relieve stress—particularly among those who had prior experience of smoking. In essence, participants who either were smokers and/or perceived smoking to be common and normal were more accepting of smoking in film when it is used in a realistic manner.

“It helps portray the character of what they’re like”

“It does—they can be a baddie and they can be sitting there and smoking you know, and you think, ‘you are a baddie’”

(Males, 16 and 17 years)

“It was just part of the movie”

“Its just normal”

“Its just normal to see it”

“Its realistic”

(Females, 16 and 17 years)

The hard life

Discussion of smoking effects and its addictive potential emerged often during an analysis of typical smoking images in film. Smokers indicated concern over their tobacco dependence and the impact it had on their lives. Concern was focused around the cost of smoking and the inability to quit as desired. Being addicted to nicotine clearly was an uncomfortable predicament for older teens; many regretted ever starting. However, particularly among the male students, the consolation was evident only in the understanding that being addicted meant being a ‘real’ smoker and clearly distinctive from an experimental or social smoker. The addicted smoker had evidently ‘progressed’ to the more socially credible, hardened phase of addiction. In drama and action film genre, images of smoking in film reflect a highly stylised and socially credible version of this experience. In one interview with a group of males, comparisons were made between their own lifestyles and those projected by the Scottish heroin addicts in the film Trainspotting. The gritty realism of Trainspotting and other films in the genre (e.g., Basketball Dairies) were celebrated for their exploration and representation of authenticity. In effect, the ‘hard’ life, with stress and drama is perceived to be the ‘real’, authentic life. Smoking in this context is both perfunctory and yet rendered meaningful. In the following dialogue, a group of males are discussing a film in which smoking is considered in terms of its role as an established facet of the hard-drug, gritty, urban lifestyle.

“In the more serious films”

“[It] creates them”

“Makes them more evil I think…”

“[Trainspotting] it was hard, it was really [hard]”

“Yeah Pulp Fiction as well”

“All the drugs movies”

“Its reality”

“That’s what’s happening”

“Its pretty realistic”

“Boys in the Hood was realistic”

(Males, 16 and 17 years)
Participants identified parallel references between the film experiences and experiences in suburban Auckland. *Boys in the Hood*, *Trainspotting*, and *Basketball Dairies* portrayed lifestyles that resonated with the reality of their everyday lives. Economic disadvantage, boredom, and restlessness were perceived to be the uncomfortable reality of the suburban lifestyle for this group. Despite obvious cultural and geographical distance, the linkage between the two realities acknowledged by the groups suggests that identification with film representations offer credibility to both the image and their own experiences.

**Resilience to smoking imagery**

Consistent with the younger teens in the previous study, older teenagers were bemused and appalled by the notion that smoking in film was in any way influential on their smoking behaviour. Although participants were critically aware that smoking images were used in films to promote a specific image, character type, or lifestyle, they also considered that film imagery is influentially impotent. Moreover, in addition to their perceived maturity and autonomy in decision-making, older teens felt they were sufficiently equipped with the skills necessary for deconstructing the images.

"By the age of sixteen most people who are going to smoke would have started by then and therefore likelihood of a movie playing a role on promoting smoking was minimal..."

(Female, 16 years)

Perceived pressure to smoke from media sources was discussed by several participants within the group. In some groups, it was discussed in reference to experiences during earlier years at school—experiences that often involved coercion and overt persuasion to smoke or drink alcohol. However, many participants fervently argued for an appreciation of their own rich experience in life, which has set them up for sound and autonomous decision-making. Many felt that they were reaching a stage in their own lives (leaving school for work, planning careers, etc.) in which they were sufficiently aware of media persuasion tactics.

Decisions to smoke were considered as purely personal choices, and judgement on smoking status suggested immaturity. The overwhelming response to this issue was that smoking was initiated during adolescence and ‘settled’ during the late teens; that is, either one smokes or one does not (or else one smokes only sometimes), and this is not a basis for judgment or ridicule. Although many participants expressed that they were in complete control of their own decision-making, they expressed concern on the behalf of younger people.

"You have gotta realise that for us we don’t realise [there is smoking in film] cos we don’t care, but little kids you know...it’s a whole [different thing]."

"...Cos they look at it and they’re so into it [smoking]..."

"They see it as part of the fashion and the trend and they think, “oh yeah, I should smoke”...and they think its cool"

“I don’t actually notice it as its just part of the norm at the moment"

(Males, 16 and 17 years)

The younger audience was perceived as reading the smoking imagery as a direction to take in terms of fashion and a trend, whereas older teens regarded tobacco use, both in film and in reality, as an accurate reflection of reality. The edginess of the images is deflated for this older group, but nonetheless it is a meaningful gesture of a gritty reality. For the majority of the participants, smoking was not considered to be an important or problematic issue in detracting value or appreciation from the film.

**Discussion**

The interpretative responses to smoking imagery in film by the older teens differed across several dimensions from those offered by the younger adolescents in the previous study. Older teens responded to the imagery in relation to their immediate personal experiences. Many participants within these groups were current or ex-smokers and therefore held experiential knowledge about the reality of being a smoker. Moreover, stereotyped images were regarded as patently constructed for effect only, whereas images that resonated with personal experience or values held greater credibility. In the previous study, it was evident that younger adolescents’ experiences with smoking were largely gleaned from family members and, as such, stereotypical images were more accessible and meaningful than were realistic images. Furthermore, younger adolescents were more likely than older teens to watch comedy films, which draw heavily upon stereotypes of common social behaviours.

Despite awareness of the deliberate construction of the ‘seductress’ image in film, the older females in the present study were acutely aware of the association between sexuality and smoking, and they were highly sensitive to the symbolic intentions behind the stylised images of female smokers. These images appeared to be less meaningful to the majority of younger adolescents in the previous study. Understandings about the purpose of including tobacco in film also differed
between the younger and older adolescents in the two studies. Older teens perceived tobacco to be included for two main reasons: to craft an image and to promote or advocate the product. In contrast, younger adolescents in the previous study understood tobacco to be included in film exclusively to create a stereotypical effect.

In the previous study, it was evident that young people actively interpret and negotiate images through reflection on individual experience and expectation. The 4-year age difference between the participants in the two studies is exemplified in the discrepant interpretations of smoking imagery. Older teens, with their advanced maturity, independence, and perceived experience, tended to draw upon images that reflected the reality of life. Among younger adolescents, the stereotyped ‘bad guy’ and ‘sexy woman’ representations were perceived to be more accessible, even when they were incongruent with their own reality.

Similarities in perceptions of smoking imagery evident between the younger and older adolescents offer important insights into the pervasive and consistent beliefs held by the two age groups. Participants in both studies were earnestly aware of the ‘symbolic’ presence of tobacco in film. In particular, participants in both studies were acutely aware of the association between cigarettes and stress in film. However, older teens drew upon their own experiences of tobacco as a reliable and commonly used adjunct to stress, whereas the younger adolescents in the previous study identified with smoking and expression of stress and anxiety among family members. It appears that representations of stress and tobacco use are strongly supported throughout the film media.

Older teenagers were evidently keen to project a sophisticated experiential knowledge of tobacco use and the smoking ‘performance’ and rituals as well as the subjective reality of being a smoker. From the discussions of personal narratives, it emerged that an experiential understanding of tobacco use was highly valued among the groups, and accordingly, encouraged a critical appraisal of the authenticity of the on-screen smoking performance. Tullock and Lupton (1997) argued in support of the importance of crediting the viewer with the cultural competence (and social understanding) to make a sense of imagery in relation to their own experiences (Tullock & Lupton, 1997). The interpretation of media imagery is therefore argued to be available for (if not always subject to) critique and not passively absorbed, as argued by theorists in earlier studies of media effects (Chapman, 1997; Gunter, 2000; Moscovici, 1983).

Among participants in both studies, smoking in film was largely perceived as familiar and commonplace, and yet effective in enhancing the essential nature of a character. Cigarettes also were thought to hold specific meanings in film—meanings that fulfil cultural expecta-

...
is simply placed between the fingers of an unlikely smoker and the unpredictability of this placement arouses attention and curiosity.

Although our understanding of the representation of tobacco products through media has increased significantly over the past decade with the emergence of critical content analyses (Escamilla et al., 2000; McIntosh et al., 1998; Stockwell & Glantz, 1997) and cross-sectional studies (Tickle et al., 2001), our understanding of how young people interpret these images and which groups perceive smoking images as salient and meaningful has remained unclear. Even with this knowledge, it is still not clear whether reading an image as meaningful actually alters beliefs about the normalcy and appropriateness of the behaviour within specific cultural contexts. These questions are notoriously difficult to investigate with the limitations of many media research methods (Gunter, 2000). Models of mass media communication have developed significantly from formative debates surrounding imagery effects on behaviour. However, theories of mass communications continue to struggle to decipher the complex relationships between the film imagery, perceptions and behaviours (Gunter, 2000; Tullock & Lupton, 1997).

According to Moscovici (1983), social representations are contained and elaborated within everyday images, myths, legends, etc., and as such, a social representation can be understood as a schema of values, ideas and social practices. Images of tobacco use as presented in film are assessed according to their relevance or cohesion with prior knowledge and expectations, which may be both particular and shared across a social group. If the images are perceived to be consistent with expectation, they are less likely to be challenged or rejected (Morgenstern, 1992). Moreover, lay theories about smoking are likely to shift and change over time as new situations and explanations are encountered and integrated into personal belief structures.

Evidence from the two studies suggest that images of tobacco use in film perform according to expectation, serving to maintain the collective perception that tobacco use is enmeshed with cultural practice and normative social behaviour. Therefore, the social representation tobacco imagery in film also serves to reiterate and reassert the pervasive presence of tobacco within contemporary society. However, social representations are also subject to rhetorical debate. In the face of contrary messages, actively disseminated by the tobacco control and public health communities, the durability of tobacco images remains uncertain (Billig, 1991). Sullivan, Dutton, and Rayer (1998) argues that images are always negotiable and therefore vulnerable to falsification or challenge. Further research is warranted to investigate the impact of anti-tobacco marketing messages on the interpretation of smoking imagery.

Conclusion

Film images of tobacco appear to play an important role in supporting and maintaining commonly held beliefs about normative smoking behaviour within specific cultural contexts for older adolescents. Moreover, pervasive representations of the smoker in film appear to offer support to established current smokers and ambivalent non-smokers through the reiteration of the universality and normalcy of smoking. The persistent inclusion of tobacco in film and its immediate acceptance as ‘normal’ and appropriate is an affirmation of the established position tobacco holds within youth culture, particularly among older teens. Essentially, it is the virtually unconscious acceptance of tobacco imagery that may render it as powerful.

Ambivalence typifies the response towards the use of smoking imagery in film among older adolescents. Beliefs about personal resistance to tobacco imagery combined with a tolerant attitude towards peers smoking presents a new challenge for tobacco control. To what extent these interpretations, in particular the association between smoking and images of ‘real life’ experiences, are shared across a broader sample of teens and what factors may shape interpretations is still uncertain. Furthermore, it is unclear what roles the various interpretations of smoking imagery (or even the awareness of smoking in film) play in the construction of smoking attitudes and behaviours. With a deeper understanding of these processes, we are better positioned to develop strategies for destabilising the pervasiveness of smoking in film.

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