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Warning: The Narratives of Smoking Habits Through the Lens of Adolescent Cigarette Users

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ABSTRACT

Cigarette smoking remains a significant public health concern among adolescents despite continuing health-awareness campaigns. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the smoking habits of adolescent cigarette users and documented their lived experiences, influential factors, and insights regarding smoking. Ten adolescent cigarette users residing in Mati City, Davao Oriental, Philippines, were selected purposively. The participants were 10 to 19 years old and were identified as active cigarette users. Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings generated three major themes and eight sub-themes. Participants described narratives of anxiety and fulfillment, indicating that smoking was perceived as a coping response to emotional distress, social pressures, and personal insecurities, while also being associated with feelings of relaxation, belongingness, and social acceptance. Factors influencing smoking habits were grouped into sociodemographic, behavioral, and environmental factors. Family culture, gender-related expectations, socioeconomic conditions, academic difficulties, social isolation, easy access to tobacco products, and exposure to tobacco advertising emerged from the narratives. The participants also emphasized three important insights: knowing the potential health risks of smoking, exercising self-control, and identifying positive role models. The study concludes that adolescent smoking is a multifaceted phenomenon that requires coordinated prevention and cessation initiatives involving families, schools, communities, health professionals, and policymakers.

Keywords: *adolescent smoking, cigarette users, smoking habits, phenomenology, tobacco-use prevention, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

Cigarette smoking remains a preventable health concern that affects individuals across the life span. Adolescence is an important period for prevention because experimentation and repeated use may develop during a stage characterized by increasing independence, peer interaction, and identity formation. Fulmer et al. (2015) described tobacco-related media exposure as a factor associated with youth susceptibility, experimentation, and current tobacco use. Loffredo et al. (2015) likewise emphasized the continuing burden associated with tobacco smoking.

Adolescent smoking is not explained by a single factor. Young people may encounter social influence from family members, peers, and media representations. They may also perceive smoking as a way to manage distress, fit into a group, or project an identity. Alyazani and Hamadeh (2015) discussed areas for tobacco-related intervention, while Breslau (2015) associated nicotine dependence with depression and anxiety among young

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adults. Although smoking may be perceived by some users as calming or socially beneficial, these perceived effects do not remove its health risks.

Environmental conditions also shape adolescent smoking. Tobacco products may remain accessible through retail outlets, including small neighborhood stores, while advertisements and promotional materials can normalize their presence. Jason et al. (2018) discussed enforcement approaches for reducing illegal cigarette sales to minors. Ruel et al. (2014) examined tobacco-retail environments, demonstrating the importance of regulating access and marketing exposure.

Within the Philippine context, locally grounded qualitative evidence is important because adolescent smoking habits are shaped by personal experiences and community conditions. This study explored the narratives of ten adolescent cigarette users residing in Mati City, Davao Oriental. It sought to describe their smoking-related experiences, identify influential factors, and document the insights they wished to share with peers and the academe. The findings were used as a basis for proposing a coordinated smoking-cessation intervention program for adolescents.

Literature Review

Emotional Experiences and Perceived Fulfillment

Some adolescents may use cigarettes when coping with distress, anxiety, or difficult personal situations. Breslau (2015) discussed the relationship between nicotine dependence, depression, and anxiety, while Amering (2014) reported an association between cigarette smoking and panic-related concerns. These studies suggest that perceived emotional relief can become part of the reasoning adolescents use to continue smoking.

Smoking may also be associated with perceptions of relaxation, improved mood, identity, or social acceptance. Nilsson (2017) described adolescents' perceptions of smoking uptake and prevention, highlighting the symbolic meanings young people may attach to smoking. These perceptions are particularly relevant when adolescents feel insecure or seek acceptance from peers.

Perceived emotional or social benefits should be interpreted cautiously. They reflect the meanings participants attach to smoking rather than evidence that smoking improves well-being. Understanding these narratives is nevertheless important because interventions need to address the reasons adolescents believe cigarettes help them cope.

Sociodemographic, Behavioral, and Environmental Influences

Adolescent smoking can be shaped by social and cultural expectations. Epstein et al. (2018) discussed psychosocial predictors of cigarette smoking, while Ng et al. (2017) examined how smoking may be framed as a symbol of masculinity among adolescent boys. Family practices and peer norms can also influence how young people interpret smoking and whether they consider it acceptable.

School-related experiences may contribute to smoking behavior when adolescents encounter academic difficulty, low connectedness, or social isolation. Libbey (2014) emphasized the importance of school attachment, bonding, connectedness, and engagement. Tucker et al. (2018) described temporal associations between smoking, social influence, academic performance, and delinquency. These studies support the need to consider the adolescent's broader educational environment.

The physical environment also matters. Jason et al. (2018) discussed ways of reducing illegal cigarette sales to minors. Ruel et al. (2014) examined tobacco-retail environments after the Master Settlement Agreement, while Chung-Hall et al. (2018) highlighted tobacco-control education and health-warning communication. These findings support the regulation of youth access and the continued use of public-health messaging.

Prevention, Self-Control, and Positive Role Models

Smoking prevention requires more than information alone. Adolescents may need practical support for making healthier decisions, managing distress, and resisting social pressure. Wills et al. (2020) discussed temperament and adolescent substance use in relation to risk and protection. Self-control, goal-setting, and problem-solving can help young people evaluate consequences and avoid harmful habits.

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Families, peers, and adult figures can serve either as risk factors or as protective influences. Otten et al. (2017) examined parental smoking and adolescent smoking stages, emphasizing the importance of family context. Young people may also imitate behaviors portrayed by admired peers, adults, or media personalities. Prevention programs should therefore promote positive role models and strengthen supportive relationships.

The World Health Organization (2009) emphasized tobacco-control education, communication, training, and public awareness. For adolescents, these strategies can be strengthened through coordinated interventions involving peer support, professional counseling, family engagement, and community enforcement of restrictions on tobacco sales to minors.

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design. This approach was appropriate because the inquiry focused on the lived experiences of adolescent cigarette users and the meanings they attached to their smoking habits. Phenomenology enabled the researcher to examine recurring patterns across the participants' narratives while preserving the context of their experiences (Creswell, 2007).

Research Locale

The study was conducted in Mati City, Davao Oriental, Philippines. The locale was selected because it provided access to adolescent cigarette users whose experiences could contribute to a more contextualized understanding of smoking habits among young people.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Ten adolescent cigarette users were selected through purposive sampling. Participants met the following inclusion criteria: they were identified as cigarette users, were 10 to 19 years old, resided in Mati City, Davao Oriental, and demonstrated smoking-related habits or participation. Purposive sampling was appropriate because the study required participants with direct experience of the phenomenon being examined (Alchemer, 2020). To reduce the risk of re-identification in a publication setting, the detailed participant biographies from the source manuscript were not reproduced in the journal article.

Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore the participants' narratives, influential factors, and insights regarding smoking. The questions were designed to obtain open-ended descriptions while allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions when clarification was needed. Semi-structured interviews are useful when a study seeks to understand participant perspectives on sensitive experiences (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher secured permission before data gathering, identified eligible participants, explained the purpose and procedures of the study, and conducted in-depth interviews. The participants' responses were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for analysis. Member checking and reflexive journaling were used to strengthen transparency and reduce misinterpretation. Pseudonyms were used in the source manuscript to protect participant identities.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed thematically. Significant statements were identified, coded, and organized into clusters of meaning. The researcher then developed themes and sub-themes that described the participants' lived experiences, the factors that influenced their smoking habits, and the insights they wished to share. The analysis produced three major themes and eight sub-themes.

Ethical Consideration

The study observed informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation, protection from harm, and the participants' right to withdraw. The source manuscript stated that participants received orientation

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regarding the study and that records were maintained privately. Because several participants were minors, the final submission should explicitly confirm the documented parental or guardian consent and adolescent assent procedures. The institutional ethics-review reference number should also be supplied when available.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Themes

The thematic analysis generated three major themes and eight sub-themes. The findings show that adolescent smoking was linked to emotional experiences, social pressures, cultural expectations, school-related difficulties, environmental access, and the participants' reflections on prevention and cessation.

Table 1. *Major Themes and Sub-Themes on Adolescent Smoking Habits*

Major theme	Sub-theme	Synthesis of findings
Narratives of the participants	Narratives of anxiety	Participants described smoking as a response to worries, emotional distress, and the absence of someone to approach for support.
Narratives of the participants	Narratives of fulfillment	Participants associated smoking with perceived relaxation, improved mood, belongingness, social acceptance, and identity.
Influential factors	Sociodemographic factors	Family culture, gender-related expectations, and socioeconomic conditions shaped smoking-related decisions.
Influential factors	Behavioral factors	Academic discouragement, weak school connectedness, social isolation, and perceived inadequacy contributed to smoking habits.
Influential factors	Environmental factors	Easy access to cigarettes through local stores and exposure to tobacco promotion were described as enabling conditions.
Insights of the participants	Knowing potential health risks	Participants emphasized awareness of smoking-related health risks and the importance of public-health information.
Insights of the participants	Imposing self-control	Participants encouraged discipline, goal-setting, and avoidance of harmful habits before dependence develops.
Insights of the participants	Identifying good role models	Participants stressed the value of positive peers, family influences, and responsible media role models.

Narratives of Anxiety and Fulfillment

The first major theme focused on the meanings participants attached to smoking. Some adolescents described smoking as a response to personal problems, emotional distress, or a lack of social support. They perceived cigarette use as a temporary way to manage difficult feelings. This finding aligns with the literature describing connections between smoking, anxiety, and perceived emotional relief (Amering, 2014; Breslau, 2015).

Other participants described perceived fulfillment. Smoking was associated with relaxation, improved mood, social belonging, and the construction of an identity. For some adolescents, cigarette use became connected to a desire to feel accepted by peers or to project confidence. Nilsson (2017) similarly discussed the symbolic meaning of smoking among adolescents. These perceived benefits should not be treated as positive outcomes; rather, they demonstrate the beliefs that prevention programs need to address.

Sociodemographic, Behavioral, and Environmental Factors

The second major theme identified multiple factors that influenced smoking habits. Participants described family practices and cultural familiarity with smoking. Gender-related expectations also appeared in the narratives, particularly when smoking was associated with masculinity or the desire to project a particular image. Similar observations have been discussed in studies of adolescent boys and smoking-related gender norms (Ng et al., 2017).

Behavioral factors were reflected in stories of academic discouragement, social isolation, weak school connectedness, and feelings of inadequacy. Some participants described smoking after experiencing difficulty in school or conflict in educational settings. Libbey (2014) emphasized the protective role of school connectedness, while Tucker et al. (2018) discussed associations among smoking, academic performance, and social influence.

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Environmental factors included the accessibility of tobacco products and exposure to advertisements. Participants described purchasing cigarettes from neighborhood stores or convenience stores despite being minors. They also recognized the influence of media promotion. These accounts support the need for stronger implementation of restrictions on tobacco sales to minors and continued monitoring of tobacco-marketing environments (Jason et al., 2018; Ruel et al., 2014).

Insights Shared by the Participants

The third major theme consisted of participant insights. First, adolescents emphasized the importance of knowing the potential health risks of cigarette use. They referred to health information encountered in school, media, and personal experience. Chung-Hall et al. (2018) discussed the role of health-warning communication in tobacco control, while the World Health Organization (2009) emphasized education and public awareness.

Second, participants highlighted self-control. They encouraged other adolescents to avoid smoking, set goals, prioritize education, and resist social pressure. These insights are consistent with the view that self-control and goal-oriented behavior can function as protective factors against substance use (Wills et al., 2020).

Third, participants emphasized the selection of positive role models. They encouraged young people to avoid imitating smokers in their families, peer groups, or media environments and to seek influences that support healthier choices. Otten et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of parental smoking in adolescent smoking stages. The findings demonstrate that cessation and prevention should involve both individual decision-making and the social environments surrounding adolescents.

Proposed Smoking-Cessation Intervention Program

The source manuscript proposed a smoking-cessation intervention program for adolescents. The program combines peer counseling, professional counseling, family-based support, and community-based action. The intervention framework is presented as a practical guide that may be reviewed and refined by qualified health professionals, school personnel, families, and local stakeholders before implementation.

Table 2. *Proposed Smoking-Cessation Intervention Program for Adolescents*

Intervention component	Primary activities	Key persons involved	Intended contribution
Peer counseling	Guided peer-support activities and motivational discussions led by trained non-smoking adolescents	Trained peer supporters and school personnel	Strengthen positive peer influence and reinforce healthy choices
Professional counseling	Individualized assessment and counseling focused on emotional, social, and behavioral factors	Licensed psychologists, counselors, or therapists	Provide appropriate professional support and referral
Family-based intervention	Family communication, supportive routines, monitoring, and encouragement for cessation	Parents, guardians, and immediate family members	Create a stable home-based support system
Community-based intervention	Health-education seminars, youth activities, enforcement of restrictions on cigarette sales to minors, and public-awareness campaigns	Local government units, DSWD, health personnel, schools, and community leaders	Reduce environmental access and promote community-wide prevention

CONCLUSION

Adolescent smoking is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by emotional, social, cultural, behavioral, and environmental factors. The participants described smoking as a response to anxiety and as a perceived source of relaxation, belongingness, and identity. Their narratives also revealed the influence of family practices, gender-related expectations, socioeconomic conditions, academic difficulties, social isolation, easy access to tobacco products, and media exposure. Importantly, the adolescents recognized the value of understanding health risks, exercising self-control, and identifying positive role models. The findings show that smoking prevention and

cessation should not be limited to information campaigns alone. Effective responses require coordinated efforts that address the individual adolescent, the family environment, the school context, access to tobacco products, and community-level enforcement.

Recommendation

Schools and community stakeholders should strengthen age-appropriate tobacco-prevention education, counseling support, and referral pathways for adolescents who smoke. Parents and guardians should be included in supportive, non-stigmatizing interventions that encourage communication and healthy coping. Local government units and community leaders should reinforce restrictions on tobacco sales to minors and monitor retail environments where cigarettes remain accessible. Qualified health professionals should review and guide cessation initiatives for adolescents, particularly when participants report emotional distress or signs of dependence. Future studies should involve broader and more diverse samples, examine the perspectives of families and school personnel, and evaluate the outcomes of structured prevention and cessation programs over time.

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