

Smoking on the Silver Screen: New Study Shows Exposure to Smokers in Movies Increases Likelihood of Smoking in the Future

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A new study appearing in the July issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reports that watching an actor smoke on the big screen may make smokers more likely to continue smoking in the future, and make nonsmokers more favorably disposed toward smoking.

Sonya Dal Cin, Postdoctoral Fellow at the Norris Cotton Cancer Center of Dartmouth Medical School, and colleagues from the University of Waterloo and Central Michigan University, assessed the level to which identification with a protagonist on film alters our implicit associations between the self and smoking.

They studied 52 male college undergrads, about half of which reported daily smoking habits. The participants then watched a clip from the same movie in which the protagonist either smoked or did not smoke. After the clip, the participants reported how much they identified with the character and their evaluation of him.

The researchers then administered a standard Implicit Association Test to gather information on the participant's implicit thoughts about smoking.

The results were clear. For both smokers and non-smokers, identification with the smoking protagonist led to greater implicit association of smoking with the self. Thus, exposure to smoking in a movie has an influence on smoking-related thoughts.

These results show preliminary evidence of a mechanism through which smoking in movies exerts its effects on the audience's implicit beliefs.

The study is part of a larger program of research on the persuasive impact of stories and the effect that identifying with characters has on one's own self-concept. Dal Cin writes that "exposure to behaviors in film can exert subtle influence" on our behavior. She also explains that examining the identification process between audience and character may help determine why some individuals enact violent behaviors they observe in the media, while others do not.

"Our finding that exposure to smoking in a movie affected non-smokers as well doesn't mean that non-smokers are suddenly going to be lighting up. However, the subtle influence of smoking in the movies may lead non-smokers to be slightly less negative about smoking or may lead them to believe that smoking is a more normal behavior than would otherwise be the case," said Geoffrey T. Fong, Psychology Professor at the University of Waterloo, and a co-author of the study.