

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### In their own voices: Iranian adolescent girls' views about smoking

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#### ABSTRACT


**Background:** Gender differences in use of substances are decreasing. **Aims and Objectives:** Understanding underlie reasons for smoking in the girls is the key for developing effective policy aimed at lowering the prevalence of smoking among girls and young females. **Materials and Methods:** In this conventional content analysis study, 11 Iranian adolescent girls aged 15–18 years old, was surveyed to explore their views about smoking. Through in-depth and semi-structured interviews, participants were encouraged to talk about their smoking behavior freely. **Results:** The results of this study revealed the following themes: Showing off, Conformance, Seeking to remove gender differences, and Confrontation. **Conclusion:** Based on these findings, we discovered an adolescent girl's smoking can somehow be a social activity mostly performed as a means whereby her social needs are met. Indeed, there is a parallel relationship between adolescents' need for smoking and their psychosocial and developmental needs.

**KEY WORDS:** Adolescent Girls; Smoking; Qualitative Study; Iran

#### INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a stage in human life most susceptible to changes. The beginning of personality and identity formation is attributed to this period.<sup>[1]</sup> Due to the rapid physical, psychological and social changes characteristic of this period, it is associated with numerous health-affecting issues; moreover, many high-risk and health-threatening behaviors start to progress from here on.<sup>[2]</sup> High-risk behaviors such as substance use are considered a major cause of mortality and morbidity in adolescents across the world.<sup>[3]</sup> On the

other hand, researchers found that gender differences in use of substances are decreasing.<sup>[4-7]</sup> Despite declining global rates of male cigarette smoking, female global rates have escalated dramatically,<sup>[8]</sup> whereas both sex- and gender-related factors affect women's smoking and the diseases that result.<sup>[9-13]</sup> Hence, preventing smoking in girls and young women takes on a high priority in public health, especially in countries with the primarily young population. In Iran, despite the legal and customary ban on cigarette smoking especially among female, national studies are indicative of the increasing trend in adolescents tobacco use, particularly in girls.<sup>[14]</sup> Researchers have shown that girls possess a greater understanding of the risks associated with drug use compared to boys.<sup>[15,16]</sup> In addition, women's smoking is a huge taboo in the Iranian society. Why then, despite the public taboo and girl's greater understanding of the effects of drug use, are the alarms ringing for the increasing trend of cigarette smoking among girls? Although researches have been written about risk factors associated with adolescent

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cigarette smoking for years,<sup>[17-20]</sup> there has been little talk of the experiences and perspectives of adolescents, especially girls, and the language they use to talk about smoking and their perception of the world around them. Yet, it was qualitative research that revealed gender roles in adolescent smoking for the first time ever.<sup>[21]</sup> Qualitative studies are the most beneficial approach to fully understand the underlying causes of adolescents smoking and to find the answers to “why” questions.<sup>[22,23]</sup> A quantitative study can reveal the relationship between variables; when a qualitative study is added in, however, the researcher can discover why and how these relationships exist. Complementing quantitative studies, qualitative studies provide a better understanding of the social context and people's own perception of their behaviors. In this regard, the present article aimed to qualitatively describe smoking experiences among Iranian adolescent girls. The present study is the second phase of an Explanatory Mixed Methods Study on risk and protective factors associated with adolescents high-risk behaviors in Iranian adolescents aged 15–18.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Participants

Study participants consisted of 11 adolescent girls' cigarette smokers taking part in the quantitative phase of the Mixed Methods study. The participants were contacted by phone. At the beginning of the interviews, the interviewer explained the purpose of the study and all participants gave their informed consent before their participation in the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality and were told they could withdraw whenever they wished. The interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants.

### Procedure

Study data were collected through in-depth, open-ended semi-structured interviews. Interviews lasted 30–120 minutes and were conducted individually while observing all matters related to the providing of mental security and privacy for the adolescents in order for them to freely express their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis and coding process began concurrently with data collection. After listening to the recorded interviews several times, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into MAXQDA software version 10. Following reading and re-reading of the transcripts, every line of the data was examined as units of analysis and the explicit and implicit meanings were extracted from the participants' statements. Units of meaning relevant to the research question were identified and then given initial codes. By integrating and summarizing the initial codes, similar codes were

categorized in relevant subcategories. Using the constant comparative analysis approach, similar subcategories were regrouped into a separate category; finally, the categories formed separate themes based on their semantic and structural correspondence. Data trustworthiness was confirmed by prolonged engagement, and member, external, and peer checking. The maximum variation of sampling has also been used for data conformability and credibility.<sup>[24,25]</sup>

## RESULTS

Participants came from different parts of Tehran and were aged 15–18 years. Except for one school dropout, the rest was high school students of different grades. Content analysis of the transcripts revealed three main themes, each of which included four to five subthemes. Each theme is discussed in turn.

### Showing off

Showing-off and exposing oneself, especially during puberty and adolescence are considered an instinctive need and a particularly natural one among girls and women. In their statements, participants also referred to this natural need:

*“After all, it's an instinctive urge to want to be noticed. Actually, I think everyone wants for others to find them interesting. Many girls do many different things to draw attention.”*

Adolescents like to be the center of everyone's attention, and even a pack of cigarettes in a girl's backpack can achieve this desire:

*“When we go out, she buys a couple of cigarettes and puts them in her backpack; she wants to attract everyone's attention.”*

According to participants, girls with cigarettes in their hands are not necessarily smokers; maybe they just make the gesture of smoking:

*“She is not a smoker, doesn't know how to. But with few people around, she wants to show herself off and say that she is somebody. She just wants to hold it; she just puts it on her lips.”*

*“I like to hold a cigarette in my hands when driving and make a smoking gesture.”*

Some participants believed smoking to be a sign of character, intellect, and high class:

*“When you smoke, people think it is elegant, they think you are of high class, or your family is different, from so and so area in Tehran, they think like that.”*

Some participants talked about their mental images and ideas for drawing attention, which explain the mental and subconscious conflicts of some adolescents for attracting attention:

*"It has always been a concern of mine to appear a little odd in my social behavior, for instance, in talking, in text messaging, in everything, like, to change something or to make it odd just to look different."*

*"Sometimes I want to be noticed, and I'm not. Or you are so lonely that you want to at least be seen. Perhaps this is only the case for cigarettes; you smoke it just to be noticed."*

A girl holding a cigarette in her hand, due to being unusual, creates a mental image of being different and peculiar compared to others:

*"For boys, smoking is commonplace, since many boys smoke. But, for girls, only one out of ten smokes, and she thinks she is doing a very peculiar job of smoking among her friends."*

*"Smoking makes you look classy. When a girl smokes, she is noticed much more."*

*"The gesture of smoking is really lovely, attractive. I like the gesture, but not the smoking per se."*

The attraction of sending targeted messages with specific coercions through the media and the internet was the topic of discussion among some participants:

*"In movies, they show that a girl who smokes appears very cool to a boy or to others."*

*"They show smoking, drinking and having sexual relationships with boys to be particular to high classes of the society. Well, if I'm not of such a high class, I want to at least look it."*

*"They post a photo on Facebook, and they say, look how beautiful she is, how classy, look she is smoking, why shouldn't I."*

*"I saw this in a romantic movie, now it has become a part of my subconscious mind. Like, when it rains... and you're alone..., you must smoke..."*

### Conformance

Adolescents highly value maintaining their relationships with peer groups and seek to be in harmony with them in different social settings. Proving oneself in groups and the survival of friendships sometimes require the undisputed following:

*"If I smoke in front of my friends, I'll be highly approved and they will notice me."*

*"You ask someone if she's coming to so and so party, and if she says no, then she'll be out of the group as of the next day, if she doesn't smoke or drink, she has no place in that group."*

Smoking is even considered a common topic for discussion among peers:

*"When we sit together, we talk about music, films and whatever else; but smoking has somehow become a common topic for conversations."*

*"They say that this person who smokes cigarettes, who smokes the hookah every day, she's excellent. But another girl who doesn't smoke is old-fashioned; we should not ask her out anymore, she is not game for this."*

Establishing social connections particularly oriented toward the opposite sex exposes some girls to boys who use drugs and can also turn cigarettes into a means of gaining approval for entering certain friendship groups of boys:

*"Many boys who smokes like their partner to smoke, too."*

*"He offered, and I thought it'd be rude not to take one, and it'd spoil my chances, so I did, and lit it up."*

*"He will definitely say that I'm not cool if I don't smoke."*

### Seeking to Remove Gender Differences

According to the participants "being a girl" has its own particular limitations and deprivations:

*"Well, it is a discrimination they have imposed on us. I'm not allowed to do what I want, so I ask, how come my brother can? They say, because he is a boy. I should not be denied of things just because I am a girl."*

Participants referred to the limitation of girls in traditional gender roles and the community or family's definition of the limits of girls compared to boys:

*"In the family or in the society, girls are neither valued nor given the confidence they should be given. The boy in the family travels alone, it's no problem, he can handle himself. You can't handle yourself. Why? Because I'm a girl?"*

*"Families restrict girls more, and not boys. They think girls are more vulnerable in the society. They all say that."*

*"My brother's younger than me, but he's much more self-confident than me, because he has always been told that he can."*

*"When you see a boy smoking in the street, you may not even notice that he is smoking. But they'd give a dirty look if a girl was seen holding even an empty pack of cigarettes in her hand. Gosh, they say. If she was a proper girl, she wouldn't be smoking."*

Practicing boy-like behaviors with the intention of proving oneself, attempts to overtake boys and compete with them in various ways, from getting a very short haircut to motorcycling, and from going to the football stadium to using drugs, have all been observed:

*"Girls dressing like boys, going to football and riding a motorcycle, they are just saying that they exist too, and that they are no less than any man. Smoking cigarettes is part of that, too."*

*"I want to show that I'm no different than a boy. So I go and do this, I smoke. Why should I be any different from the boy of the family?"*

### Confrontation

The adolescent girls talked about an adolescent girl's fight against domestic and societal mishaps, contradictions and burdens. The lack of sufficient kindness and affection, and the mere imposing of aggressive and controlling behaviors on the part of parents intended to protect adolescent girls can hurt and humiliate and thus force them to turn to the malicious world outside the home:

*"They (parents) always behave aggressively, and it is for your own protection they say. Aggressive protection is less effective than if they did it with kindness."*

*"When there isn't enough love at home, it has to be compensated for somehow, so you turn to society, to cigarettes, and to boys around."*

*"I've never received anything called love from my father."*

*"My father always says that I'm just a child and can't do most things."*

Some participants referred to the disparity between family and society. They believe it is the differences and the disparities that make adolescents turn into imitating others and distance them from the caring atmosphere of home:

*"At home, my father has seriously restricted me. But, when I come outside, the world isn't like that. Things my*

*father regards as awful, aren't at all awful among my friends, in the society."*

*"When I go out of the territory of my very strict family, I start to see new things. I have never seen such things at home. For example, smoking and such, never saw it in my family. So when I go out and see that, well it's interesting to me."*

Some participants talked about how rebellion, spite and to struggle against prohibitions and restrictions end in defiance and disobedience:

*"In such families, the girl wants to do things out of spite, they restrict her and she gets fed-up. She wants to be free."*

*"They (parents) have forbidden you from something that you don't believe in; I don't believe in what they say."*

*"Sometimes I act despite my father's wishes, just to prove myself."*

*"Cigarette is not at all a good thing, but I don't know what it is that makes it so satisfying. Perhaps because it is forbidden, we think we are doing a good thing. Our subconscious tells us to do it. Perhaps it has to do with how it is forbidden."*

### DISCUSSION

There are many opportunities to increase health providers' effectiveness in dealing with girls' smoking. But shifting from "telling" to "asking" is an important aspect of this.<sup>[26]</sup> This shift needs to discover the meanings of smoking to adolescent girls, as well as the social and cultural contexts in which their cigarette smoking occurs. In the present qualitative study, we found that smoking an adolescent girl is closely related with various aspects of her individual, family and social life. According to the participants, cigarettes smoking can provide an easily available means for being the focus of everyone's attention. Attempts to discover oneself and to create an image of oneself in other people's mind is a particular concern for adolescents in their interactions with others, which might lead to a mental and psychological crisis. The mental ideas of some of our study participants about "looking cool to others," "being seen," and "proving oneself to others" were also associated with smoking and doing other drugs. In fact, our study participants referred to the image a girl's smoking evokes in other people's minds rather than the act of smoking itself. An interesting point is that adolescent girls holding a cigarette in their hands or hanging their hand from the car window with a cigarette in it are not necessarily smokers; rather, it is the gesture of smoking that is an instrument for attracting others' attention. Messages received from the

media, the internet and non-domestic role models, formed another important issue that our study participants had found to play a major role in creating mental images in adolescent minds. It seems that media imagery and establishing feigned associations between smoking and stress, sadness, fear, happiness, love, character, etc., pose a challenge to drug control.<sup>[23,27]</sup> The present study placed a high value on the undeniable role of friends and peers as a key social unit. The unparalleled role of peers is emphasized to the degree that it is referred to as “peer socialization,” meaning that the individual engages in values and behaviors agreeable and pleasant to the members of the group to be accepted by them. Some researchers thus consider tobacco use in girls a means of social identification.<sup>[28]</sup> Dependence and attachment to peer group's forms over time by receiving open (articulated) and hidden (heard or seen) messages from the group.<sup>[29]</sup> The important point is that peer socialization is dominantly imposed by an indirect peer pressure rather than the direct offering of a smoke from friends. In this study, participants discussed both the direct (offering of a cigarette) and indirect (being cool and game) types of pressure, but it were the indirect aspect of it that was particularly emphasized by the girls. In our study participants compared gender roles and attributed smoking in girls to their attempts at reducing differences and discriminations. Although smoking is stigmatized and considered immoral in most societies, particularly in Iran, studies have shown that some girls associate this act with masculine attributes such as “roughness” and “risk-taking” and have also addressed this distressing hypothesis that masculinity and strength have increased girls' attraction to smoking.<sup>[30]</sup> Although society's assessment of smoking in women as elegant and attractive can encourage them further on,<sup>[31]</sup> even in a society that sees smoking of women as obscene and against the customs; some women are still encouraged to smoke.<sup>[30]</sup> A lot has been said and written about the affectionate upbringing atmosphere of families; however, a noteworthy point some of our participants mentioned was the disagreement between the domestic atmosphere on the one hand, and the cultural atmosphere of society on the other, meaning that when the adolescent girls compared the hard restrictions imposed on them by their parents against the tacit freedom available in the society for both boys and girls, the result was nothing but confusion, conflict and, ultimately, rebellion. Some of the studied adolescents proposed the potential effect of smoking on parental anger and despair and mentioned how smoking is a rebellious act against severely controlling parents.<sup>[23]</sup> In general, we learnt that for gaining a proper understanding of adolescent girl's smoking, different social units cannot be ignored, including the family, peers and the society in which the adolescent girl has grown up and has her values and beliefs formed her in interactions with them. Engaging in high-risk behaviors during adolescence is mainly unintentional and occurs in response to the social environment. Adolescence behaviors follow a complex pattern of friends' approval, interaction with parents and other behavioral models. This pattern shows the importance

of social context in the socialization process in adolescent's life. The social context determines the extent and nature of interpersonal interactions and can be the strongest most significant determining factor in the adolescent performing of life-threatening behaviors such as tobacco use.

## CONCLUSION

We discovered that an adolescent girl's smoking can somehow be a social activity mostly performed as a means whereby her social needs are met, including seeking other people's attention and approval, establishing a place for herself in her peer groups, removing gender differences, or, in some cases, dealing with upheavals in the family and the social contradictions existing around her. Further studies should be conducted to discover the relationship between the adolescent girls' need for smoking and those of their needs that are associated with their developmental and psychosocial changes, thereby making the designing of more effective targeted interventions possible.

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