



# The Power of Appearance: A Research Project on Smoking Cessation

By Chua Shunjie

**“IF THE** pursuit of a certain appearance can cause someone to start a habit, will it be able to help them to drop one as well?” This idea came to me in August last year after reading a paper stating that appearance-based methods could increase the use of sunscreen and also learning about the impending 50th anniversary of the first Surgeon General’s Report on Smoking and Health. Naturally, the habit that I intended to target was smoking.

Two months later in October, I had the opportunity to test out this hypothesis when I joined the smoking cessation clinic at Nanjing University Hospital (NJUH) to participate in a collaborative project with Shiseido Research Center (SRC). I came aboard after the project had commenced and was hence only able to take part in the recruitment and intervention stages. However, it was still a great experience as I managed to learn the clinical aspects of smoking and smoking cessation. I also familiarised myself with the methods of technical research while working alongside SRC members.

## Recruitment

Upon entering the project, I started with the recruitment of research subjects. This was my favourite part of the entire study as I got to spend the most time with the patients. To ensure that they could make an informed choice of whether to take part, I shared project details and explored their personal demographics and medical histories with them.

I had numerous long conversations with patients who willingly revealed every detail of their lives. Through these stories, I discovered that most patients used smoking as a coping mechanism during times of distress. Others used

it to blend in with the popular crowd or attain the physical appearance that they desired. One of the patients drew an interesting analogy to describe this habit: like a haunted house in a movie that allowed people to enter easily, but made it difficult for them to escape.

I felt that this was the most pivotal phase of the project. The researcher-subject relationships that were developed during this period were useful as the patients, including those who did not eventually volunteer for the study, often became more inclined to frequent follow-ups and also more compliant to the advice offered by the clinic.

## Intervention

The intervention stage of the project comprised an awareness programme that created digitally modified facial images of patients if they stopped smoking, in the hope that they would be encouraged to quit smoking in favour of a more desirable physical appearance. This method has been proven to be effective in other studies, such as increasing sunscreen use and modifying diets.

While preparing the samples, I realised the importance of appearance to the patients in our study. There were those who initially feared removing their make-up during the photo-taking sessions. Some even exclaimed that they had never left their houses without make-up before, while others mentioned that their partners were unaware of their looks sans cosmetics. The researcher-subject relationships that were established during the recruitment stage earlier really made a difference. With some persuasion and assurance about data confidentiality, most patients eventually relented and allowed us to photograph them.

After the shots were taken, I proceeded to perform image processing with the technical team, using skills that I acquired from a simple course I had attended for this study. We tried our best to follow evidence-based changes to facial skin caused by smoking as recorded in the literature, and would often adjust the participants' skin texture and tones.

Later, the edited images were unveiled to the patients as part of the project's counselling segment. It was heartwarming for us to witness the patients breaking into wide grins after seeing improved versions of themselves. Some patients commented that they would not have started smoking if they had known their skin condition would be greatly enhanced as a result. Many patients asked for their modified pictures, so we decided to provide all of them with copies, which would hopefully serve as a daily reminder of the benefits of smoking cessation.

### **Moving forward**

This project has not ended yet, but initial results have been positive. Patients have expressed increased motivation to stop smoking, and more quit attempts have been recorded.

Through this smoking cessation research project, I have learnt that just as different people have different tastes, everyone has different impetuses to act. This can be further explored in other aspects of clinical care to encourage patients to adopt healthy behaviours.

### **Advice for students interested in research**

Singapore is currently aiming to develop Academic Medicine locally and research is a large part of this field. Some students may feel that research is just an activity to buff up their CVs with to help them enter a specialty of their choice, but it has other benefits. For example, students can develop the necessary skills to appreciate research literature, or better understand and apply statistical techniques.

Students who are interested in research should look actively for suitable mentors, who can provide ideas, professional advice and networks, which will help the latter carry out their projects. Students can also broaden their search for mentors in fields of interests outside their own for a multidisciplinary approach to research.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank faculty and staff at NJUH, SRC and Mayo Clinic (Rochester) for giving me the opportunity to take part in their smoking cessation research project, allowing me to help more patients enjoy better health. ■



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