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College Students' Communication about Nonmedical Use of Prescription Stimulants: Applying the Theory of Planned Behavior

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ABSTRACT

The study examined college students' communication surrounding nonmedical use of prescription stimulants (NPS). Using a hypothetical scenario, the researchers employed the Theory of Planned Behavior to investigate the relationship of students' attitudes, perceived social norms, and perceived behavioral control with their intent to intervene on behalf of a friend who is engaging in what they believe to be excessive NPS. College students completed anonymous web-based surveys, reporting on each of the study variables as well as demographic information. Self-reports of perceived knowledge of engaging in NPS, as well as students' levels of communication health literacy, were also collected as control variables. The study sought to investigate if college students' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control predict their intention to intervene on behalf of a friend engaging in excessive nonmedical use of prescription stimulants (NPS) when controlling for knowledge of NPS and communicative health literacy. Participants consisted of 163 undergraduate students at a small Southwestern university. Correlational and regression analyses were conducted in a statistical analysis software program for the social sciences (i.e., SPSS 19) to analyze the survey responses.

Hypothesis

H1: : College students' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control will predict their intention to intervene on behalf of a friend engaging in excessive nonmedical use of prescription stimulants (NPS) when controlling for knowledge of NPS and communicative health literacy.

METHODS

Participants for this study consisted of a convenience sample of 163 undergraduate students from a small Southwestern university. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 (*M* = 20.47, *SD* =1.46). There were 46 (28.2%) males and 115 (70.6%) females and 2 non-reports. The majority (*n* = 118) of participants were Caucasian (72.4%).

Following approval by the university's institutional review board, researchers posted a link to an online questionnaire (i.e., Survey Monkey) to the Communication Studies Subject Pool. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. Participants indicated what they perceived "excessive" NPS to be, and then responded to a series of questions regarding if they would intervene on behalf of a friend engaging in this behavior. Attitudes were assessed with 7 items (e.g., "It is my responsibility to intervene on behalf of a friend engaging in excessive nonmedical use of prescription stimulants (NPS)."). Social norms were assessed with 6 items (e.g., "It is socially acceptable to intervene on behalf of a friend engaging in excessive non medical use of prescription stimulants (NPS)." Perceived behavioral control was assessed with 4 items (e.g., "I am confident that I could reduce a friend's excessive medical use of prescription stimulants (NPS) if I confronted him or her about it"). Behavioral intentions to intervene were assessed with 8 items, including "I would approach him/her and suggest that he/she speak to a medical professional." All items assessing TPB variables were based on prior literature. Perceived knowledge was assessed using 5 items, including "I am aware of how long prescription stimulants have an effect on the body" The Communicative Health Literacy Scale (LaBelle et al., 2015) was also utilized; this 26 item scale assesses individuals motivation (e.g., "I often use 'tips' I hear on how to live a healthy life.") and ability (e.g., "I understand articles I see on how to be healthy") to gain access to, understand, and use health information from a variety of sources. Participants were asked to indicate their responses on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). All scales used in the study obtained Cronbach reliability coefficients in the acceptable range (i.e., above .70).

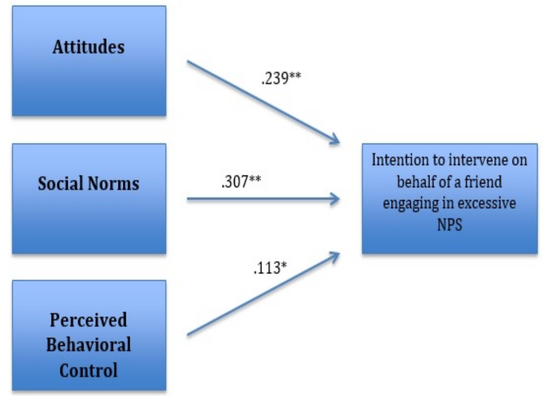
Data Analysis

In order to test the hypothesis, a linear regression was conducted in a statistical software program (i.e., SPSS 19). Individuals' attitudes, perceived social norms, and perceived behavioral control were entered as predictor variables; an individual's intention to intervene on behalf of a friend engaging in excessive NPS was the dependent variable.

RESULTS

H1: Prior to conducting our regression analyses, bivariate correlations were conducted to examine the associations among the independent and dependent variables. Neither knowledge (r = -.03 , p = .71) nor health literacy (motivation, r = . 09, p = .26 , and ability, r = .03 , p = .70) were related to behavioral intentions to intervene on behalf of a friend engaging in excessive NPS. Thus, these variables were left out of the regression analysis. Results of a linear regression revealed a significant model, F (3, 144) = 22.75, p <.001, Adjusted R^2 = .31. Importantly, while attitudes (t = 2.47, p = .02) and social norms (t = 3.27, p = .001) were significant positive predictors of intentions to intervene on behalf of a friend engaging in NPS, perceived behavioral control (t = 1.37 , p = .17) was not.

REGRESSION MODEL



* = Standardized Beta Coefficients ** = Significant Predictor

CONCLUSION

Results of this study indicate that although participants' attitudes and social norms were significant predictors of their intentions to intervene on behalf of a friend engaging in excessive NPS, perceived behavioral control was not. Importantly, social norms were the biggest predictor of these intentions; the extent to which participants perceived they could successfully engage in this communication was not as important as their sense of what influential others would think of this behavior. These results are being used to inform a campaign on the excessive use of nonprescription stimulants on college campuses.

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