



IT'S HARD TO QUIT: THE EXPLORATION OF THE REASONS FOR TROUBLE WITHDRAWAL WITH SMOKING HABITS AMONG FILIPINO EARLY ADULT MEN

ES DIFÍCIL DEJAR DE FUMAR: EXPLORACIÓN DE LAS RAZONES POR LAS CUALES ES PROBLEMÁTICO DEJAR DE FUMAR ENTRE HOMBRES FILIPINOS EN LA ADULTEZ JOVEN

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Resumen

Introducción. El tabaquismo es un problema que perjudica a las personas y a las comunidades. Varias organizaciones han estado tratando de diseñar iniciativas proactivas, pero todavía luchan por encontrar soluciones para prevenir enfermedades y muertes causadas por el tabaquismo. A pesar de los numerosos intentos por dejar de fumar, muchas personas todavía luchan por abandonar esta adicción. Por lo tanto, este estudio se realizó para explorar las razones por las cuales dejar de fumar es un desafío para los hombres en la adultez joven. **Métodos.** Utilizando un diseño de investigación fenomenológico cualitativo, veinte participantes de la investigación expresaron sus razones a través de entrevistas en profundidad. **Resultados.** Este estudio revela que los hombres adultos jóvenes continúan fumando a pesar de conocer los riesgos para la salud debido al papel percibido del tabaquismo para completar el día, ayudar a la digestión después de las comidas y proporcionar una sensación engañosa de relajación. Además, las dificultades para dejar de fumar se atribuyen al temor a desarrollar enfermedades relacionadas con el tabaquismo, la adaptación del cuerpo a los efectos adictivos de la nicotina, la influencia de los compañeros, los antojos intensos y los desafíos para regular las respuestas psicológicas y emocionales durante la abstinencia. Estos hallazgos resaltan la compleja interacción de factores psicológicos, sociales y habituales que sustentan los hábitos de fumar entre los hombres adultos tempranos. **Conclusiones.** El estudio concluye que dejar de fumar se ve obstaculizado por una combinación de rutinas diarias arraigadas, influencias sociales e intensas dependencias físicas y psicológicas. Las intervenciones eficaces para dejar de fumar deben abordar estos desafíos, incorporando estrategias de regulación emocional, apoyo de pares y terapias personalizadas para mitigar los antojos y los síntomas de abstinencia. Al comprender y abordar las razones específicas para seguir fumando y las dificultades para dejar de fumar, se pueden desarrollar estrategias de salud pública más efectivas para reducir las tasas de tabaquismo y mejorar los resultados de salud en este grupo demográfico.

Palabras clave

Cesación; narrativas de fumadores; Patrones de fumar; Desencadenantes del tabaquismo; Tabaco.

Abstract

Introduction. Smoking is a long-standing problem that harms people and communities. Various agencies have been trying to design proactive initiatives, but they still struggle to find solutions to prevent illnesses and deaths caused by smoking. Despite numerous attempts to quit, many individuals still struggle to withdraw from this addiction. Hence, this study was conducted to explore the reasons why quitting smoking is challenging for early adult men. **Methods.** Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, twenty research participants expressed their reasons through in-depth interviews. **Results.** This study reveals that early adult men continue to smoke despite knowing its health risks due to smoking's perceived role in completing their day, aiding digestion after meals, and providing a deceptive sense of relaxation. Additionally, the difficulties in withdrawing from smoking are attributed to fears of developing smoking-related diseases, the body's adaptation to nicotine's addictive effects, peer influence, intense cravings, and challenges in regulating psychological and emotional responses during withdrawal. These findings highlight the interplay of psychological, social, and habitual factors that sustain smoking habits among early adult men. **Conclusions.** The study concludes that a combination of ingrained daily routines, social influences, and intense physical and psychological dependencies hinders smoking cessation. Effective smoking cessation interventions must address these challenges, incorporating strategies for emotional regulation, peer support, and tailored therapies to mitigate cravings and withdrawal symptoms. By understanding and targeting the specific reasons for continued smoking and difficulties in cessation, more effective public health strategies can be developed to reduce smoking rates and improve health outcomes in this demographic.

Key Words

Cessation; Smokers' Narratives; Smoking Patters; Smoking Triggers; Tobacco.

1. Introduction

Smoking is widely recognized as one of the most pressing public health issues globally (Jafari et al., 2021). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), smoking is responsible for approximately 6 million deaths each year, a number projected to increase to 8 million by 2030 if current trends continue. This alarming statistic highlights the severe health impacts of smoking, which include a wide range of diseases such as lung cancer, heart disease, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (Gallucci et al., 2020). Additionally, smoking does not only harm the smoker; it also poses significant risks to non-smokers through second-hand smoke exposure (Zhao et al., 2022). Each year, an estimated 600,000 non-smokers die due to health complications arising from second-hand smoke, which can lead to severe conditions such as respiratory infections, heart disease, and lung cancer (Lee et al., 2022).

On the other hand, early adult men face significant challenges when attempting to quit smoking due to a complex interplay of psychological, physiological, and social factors (Abdelrahim et al., 2018). Psychologically, smoking often serves as a coping mechanism for stress, anxiety, and emotional discomfort, making it difficult to abandon without addressing these underlying issues (Caponnetto et al., 2020). Physiologically, nicotine addiction creates intense cravings and withdrawal symptoms, such as irritability, restlessness, and difficulty concentrating, which can be overwhelming and demotivating (Tsai et al., 2020). Socially, smoking can be deeply ingrained in daily routines and social interactions, with triggers such as social gatherings, mealtimes, and specific routines reinforcing the habit (Hoek et al., 2022). Additionally, early adult men may face societal pressures and cultural norms that glamorize smoking or view it as a rite of passage or a symbol of maturity and independence (Wellman et al., 2018).

Further, Kong et al. (2021) explained that smokers are willing to quit but have difficulty doing so; when they attempt to quit, many obstacles cause them to return to smoking, such as anxiety if they cannot smoke for even a short period, insomnia, and weight gain. In the general population, those who face numerous obstacles to quitting smoking are less motivated to complete smoking withdrawal. According to Villanti et al. (2016), quitting smoking is a difficult decision for adult smokers. As a result of peer pressure, when they attempt to stop or alter their smoking behavior, they feel different from their peers and are concerned with what their peers think of them. Men in early adulthood have a difficult time quitting smoking because they recognize that it can be beneficial on stressful days (Torres & O'Dell, 2016).

Despite the concerted efforts of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) and national governments to achieve smoke-free communities worldwide, present data reveal that early adult men continue to have difficulty quitting smoking (Wellman et al., 2018). In the Philippines, where tobacco control measures have been in place since 1987, including the enactment of Republic Act 9211, these efforts have not been sufficient to reduce smoking among young adult men. Clinical studies indicate that women generally have a higher likelihood of quitting smoking compared to men, who may perceive smoking as enhancing their image (Giulietti et al., 2020). Smoking in the Philippines poses a severe threat to public health, resulting in a high number of deaths and an increase in various diseases. Based on national statistics reports, over 112,000 Filipinos die from tobacco-related diseases each year, of which about 23% are male and 10% are female. Further, over 20% of non-communicable disease-related deaths, such as ischemic heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and lung cancer in the Philippines are attributable to tobacco use (Amul & Pang, 2018).

With this, the Philippine government is responsible for discouraging citizens from smoking and protecting public health. However, these measures primarily focus on protecting minors, leaving young adults more vulnerable to smoking initiation and maintenance. The implementation of Republic Act 9211 faces numerous challenges, including enforcement difficulties and the persistent accessibility of tobacco products for adults. Additionally, completely prohibiting tobacco for the entire population is not feasible due to potential narcotraffic issues. Therefore, it is crucial to develop and implement targeted strategies that protect young adults, who are at a critical stage of habit formation, by addressing both the accessibility of tobacco and the socio-cultural factors that perpetuate smoking behavior.

While previous studies suggest that lack of emotional regulation and the need to avoid withdrawal symptoms are primary causes for early adult men struggling to quit smoking, there is a need to examine whether these factors fully explain the difficulty in smoking cessation (Minian et al., 2020). Some interventions have focused on teaching emotional regulation strategies and coping mechanisms for withdrawal symptoms (Hendricks et al., 2016). For instance, Spears et al. (2017) implemented programs incorporating cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) to enhance emotional regulation and stress management techniques. Additionally, nicotine replacement therapies (NRT) and other pharmacological aids have been used to alleviate withdrawal symptoms (Aubin et al., 2014). Despite these interventions, relapse rates among early adult men remain notably high (Barrington-Trimis et al., 2020). Research indicates that even when individuals are equipped with emotional regulation skills and effective withdrawal coping strategies, the persistence of smoking behavior suggests other underlying factors (Rogers et al., 2019). These may include deep-seated habits, social influences, and psychological dependencies not adequately addressed by current interventions (Juranić et al., 2018). This gap highlights the necessity for a more comprehensive understanding of the complex challenges faced by early adult men in quitting smoking and the development of more targeted strategies that encompass these additional dimensions.

This study seeks to investigate the underlying reasons why early adult men face difficulties in quitting smoking, with a particular focus on their experiences and challenges during the smoking cessation process. Specifically, it aims to understand two key aspects: why these individuals continue smoking despite being aware of its harmful effects and what factors make it difficult for them to withdraw from their smoking habits.

To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a qualitative research design, using in-depth interviews with participants to capture their experiences, struggles, and the psychological and physiological factors influencing their smoking behavior. This design is particularly suited to provide rich, detailed insights into the participants' perspectives, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of their quitting challenges (Smith et al., 2018).

By exploring these experiences, this research contributes to the development of effective intervention strategies to support smoking cessation efforts in early adult men. Additionally, it offers valuable insights for public health policymakers, healthcare professionals, and future researchers looking to design targeted interventions or expand knowledge regarding smoking withdrawal. The study thus plays a vital role in deepening understanding and shaping future research and policy directions, regardless of the results obtained.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically the phenomenological approach, to examine the reasons and experiences of early adult men who have a hard time quitting their smoking habits. Qualitative research focuses on an overall or idealistic approach that can be understood and is used to comprehend a population's beliefs, experiences, ideas, and behavior (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Further, a phenomenological approach is a methodological approach used to explore and describe phenomena in a detailed and holistic manner (Williams, 2021). It aims to comprehensively understand a particular topic or phenomenon by collecting rich, non-numerical data. This research design is often used when the goal is to gain insights into the participants' beliefs, experiences, perspectives, and behaviors (Käufer & Chemero, 2021). The researcher employed a phenomenological qualitative research design as the most suitable and powerful method to understand the experiences and different perspectives among the research participants on their stories of struggle in quitting their smoking habits.

2.2. Participants and Materials

This research employed a purposive sampling technique to identify the exact participants of this study. The identification of participants includes a preliminary assessment in rural communities in Kabacan, Cotabato, Philippines, as to what area has the most common early adult men who have a smoking habit. Then, a preliminary interview was done to ask whether they had tried quitting their habits and if they had trouble when they attempted

to withdraw. The participants have unsuccessful withdrawal from their smoking habits. Data saturation was considered in the number of early adult men who participated in this study, which was achieved in the 20th participant. Hence, this study has a total of Twenty (20) participants.

The materials used in this study were a list of validated guide questions and underwent in-depth examination by qualitative research experts with extensive experience conducting phenomenological analysis. Sample questions in the interview include “Why do you still smoke even knowing that it is bad for your health? And what are the reasons why you have trouble withdrawing from your smoking habits?”. The interviews lasted approximately one hour for every participant. Also, audio recorders and cameras were used to document all undertakings to facilitate a more accurate analysis of findings.

2.3. Data Collection

After obtaining the necessary permits and ethics clearance, a preliminary assessment in rural communities in Cotabato, Philippines, was done to assess what area has the most common early adult men with a smoking habit. Then, a preliminary interview was done to ask whether they had tried quitting their habits and if they had trouble when they attempted to withdraw. The participants have unsuccessful withdrawal from their smoking habits. After identifying rightful participants, the researcher acquired an informed consent form to prove that all parties involved in the study consented and were granted permission. Informed consent emphasized that participants were entirely aware of and informed about the study's undertakings. The researcher conducted In-depth Interviews (IDI) with the participants to obtain more accurate data and forecast the participants' honesty and impartiality.

To validate the research findings, the researcher employed member checks. This process involves returning to the research participants to present their transcribed responses and obtain their consent, ensuring the accuracy and authenticity of the data. This step is crucial for confirming that the participants' perspectives were accurately captured and interpreted (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Following the member checks, peer debriefing was conducted, which involved engaging colleagues or other researchers to review and discuss the data, interpretations, and conclusions. This process provides an additional layer of scrutiny and helps to identify any biases or inconsistencies that may have arisen during the research. Peer debriefing enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the study by incorporating diverse viewpoints and ensuring that the findings are robust and well-substantiated (Iivari, 2018).

2.4. Data Analysis

This study employed Colaizzi's (1978) method of data analysis using a manual coding process. This method is effective for understanding and interpreting the experiences of research participants, making it well-suited for exploring the reasons for the difficulties in quitting smoking among early adult men.

The process began with familiarization, where the researcher read and re-read the transcribed interviews to immerse himself in the participants' descriptions and gain an overall sense of their experiences. This initial step ensured a deep understanding of the data, setting the stage for thorough analysis. Next, significant statements were identified and extracted from the transcriptions. These statements are phrases or sentences that directly relate to the participants' experiences with smoking and their challenges in quitting. Extracting these statements helped isolate the most relevant data points for further analysis.

The researcher then interpreted these significant statements to formulate meanings. This step involved distilling the essence of each statement to understand the underlying meanings and implications. The researcher carefully ensured that these formulated meanings remained true to the participants' original expressions, maintaining the authenticity of their perspectives. Following this, the formulated meanings were organized into clusters of themes. This step involved grouping similar meanings to identify broader themes representing common patterns or experiences across the participants. These clusters provided a structured way to capture key elements of the participants' experiences and facilitated a clearer understanding of the overarching themes.

The researcher developed an exhaustive description of the experiences from the clusters of themes. This comprehensive narrative encapsulated the essence of the participant's experiences and the complexities involved in their struggles to quit smoking. The exhaustive description provided a detailed account of the key themes and their interconnections. The fundamental structure of the phenomenon was then distilled from the thorough description. This step involved summarizing the essential aspects of the experience into a concise description that captured its core elements. This fundamental structure served as a clear and concise representation of the participants' challenges and experiences.

3. Results

The findings of this study reveal a complex portrait of smoking behavior among early adult men, categorized into two main aspects: perceived "positive" aspects of smoking and the adverse effects associated with it. This classification provides valuable insights into why these individuals continue to smoke despite their awareness of the health risks.

Participants articulated several reasons for their continued smoking that they perceived as beneficial to their daily lives. These aspects justify maintaining the habit, contributing to a sense of fulfillment and routine. For instance, many participants noted that smoking is integral to their daily structure, providing them with a perceived sense of completion to their day. Additionally, some expressed that smoking alleviates discomfort after meals, suggesting a reliance on cigarettes as a coping mechanism for digestive issues. Lastly, the misleading sense of relaxation associated with smoking was highlighted, indicating that participants often mistake this temporary relief for genuine tranquility, complicating their cessation efforts.

Table 1 presents the reasons cited by participants for continuing to smoke despite their awareness of smoking's harmful effects. These reasons highlight the personal, psychological, and social factors that contribute to their smoking behavior, providing insights into the challenges they face in attempting to quit.

Table 1
Participants' Reasons Why They Still Smoke Despite Knowing that Smoking is Harmful to Them

Essential Themes	Categories	Excerpts and Core Ideas
Smoking "Completes" My Day	Deceptive	"...I always think about smoking because my day feels incomplete if I don't smoke...if I can't smoke, I still salivate a lot in the entire day..."- RQ2M1
	Sense of Routine	"...when I can't smoke, I feel that my day is incomplete ..." - RQ2M7
	and Fulfillment	"I know that smoking is harmful to all of us, but cigarette completes my day. I can't function without smoking, and it helps relieve stress in my mind."- RQ2M15
		"...it seems like it has already become a part of my life..." - RQ3M18
Smoking Aids my Grossness Feeling After a Meal	After-Meal Smoking	"It's very potent and feels good, especially when you've just finished eating. It also helps relieve grossness feeling after you've finished eating."- RQ2M20
	Satisfaction	"It's just normal, something to get rid of the fullness feeling after eating."-RQ2M13 "...that is a breath freshener for me because, after a meal, I feel like there is something in my sense of taste that causes grossness..."- RQ2M4
Smoking Deceives me with the Feeling of Relaxation.	Illusion of Relaxation	"...I feel more relaxed when I smoke, and it helps me focus on my work without thinking about stress. Smoking gives me a sense of relaxation even though I know that it only deceives me..."- RQ2M6
		"...I've got used to smoking with my friends, and we all feel relaxed when we smoke together, though it just only deceives us since it has a lot of bad effects on our health"- RQ2M8

Conversely, the study also identified significant challenges and negative consequences that arise during attempts to quit smoking. Participants reported intense cravings that manifest at specific times, such as after meals or during moments of anxiety. This craving not only disrupts their daily activities but also hinders their withdrawal efforts, as the physical and psychological dependence on nicotine becomes overwhelming. Furthermore, participants expressed

anxiety regarding the potential onset of smoking-related diseases during withdrawal, which exacerbates the difficulties they face. The influence of social circles was also noted as a critical factor, with peer pressure contributing to relapse and complicating the quitting process. Together, these adverse effects illustrate the psychological and social dimensions that entrap individuals in their smoking habits.

Table 2 outlines the reasons participants find it challenging to quit their smoking habits. These reasons reveal the complex interplay of physical cravings, psychological dependence, social influences, and emotional struggles that contribute to their difficulty in sustaining smoking cessation efforts.

Table 2
Participants' Reasons Why They Have Difficulty Withdrawing from Their Smoking Habits

Essential Themes	Categories	Excerpts and Core Ideas
Fear of Prevailing Diseases During Withdrawal Process	Health-Related Anxiety in Withdrawal	"My body gets used to it, and quitting might bring withdrawal symptoms like a cold or cough, making me want to smoke again after recovery..." - RQ3M3 "When I stopped smoking, all my illnesses appeared. That's why I cannot think of quitting smoking again..." - RQ3M14 "...stopping smoking causes me to feel sick, which makes it difficult for me to quit..." RQ3M12
My Body Got Used to Its Addictive "Satisfying" Effects	Dependence on Addictive Satisfaction	"...it's very addictive. That is why I struggle to quit. When I smoke, it satisfies and calms me. That is why I've got used to it..." - RQ3M2 "...the common reason is that it satisfies my taste buds. After I eat, I crave a cigarette because it's like a sound in my head..." - RQ3M5 "...my mouth craves it, especially after eating. I look for a cigarette. Also, my friends smoke, so I tend to crave it too..." - RQ3M12 "...my body craves cigarettes, especially after I eat, and a few minutes later, I start to salivate, which makes me think of smoking..." - RQ3M2
Peer Influence Makes it Harder to Quit Smoking!	Impact of Social Influence	"Since most of my friends smoke, I often join in. If you don't have one, they'll offer, and it's hard to refuse." - RQ3M4 "...even if you try to quit and when you see people smoking around you, it will make you want to smoke again..." - RQ3M7 "...when you're with your friends, and they smoke, and you don't, you might feel left out, so you end up smoking with them..." - RQ3M17
Continuous Feeling of Extreme Cravings for Smoking	Persistent Cravings as a Barrier to Cessation	"...I crave smoking, that's why it's tough for me to quit..." - RQ3M6 "...It's hard to quit because wherever I go, I crave to smoke..." - RQ3M18 "It's difficult to quit smoking because I crave it. If I don't smoke, I feel like I starve myself like being on a diet." - RQ3M4
Difficulty in Regulating Psychological and Emotional Responses during Smoking Withdrawal Process	Emotional Strain in the Withdrawal Process	"...I'm scared to quit because I feel like I'll always be irritable. It's easy for me to get angry..." - RQ3M5 "...my mood changes when I don't have something to satisfy me, like when I can't get what I want or when I'm at work and can't concentrate. I get easily distracted and lose focus. That is why it is hard for me to quit..." - RQ3M6 "...I suppose it's just what I'm used to, and it's hard to quit smoking because I tend to become moody and irritable if I tend to quit..." - RQ3M13

4. Discussion

Reasons Why Early Adult Men Continue to Smoke Despite Knowing that It is Harmful to Their Health

Theme 1: Smoking “Completes” My Day

This theme illustrates that for some individuals, smoking is an integral part of their daily routine that provides a sense of energy and accomplishment. Research participants perceive smoking as a coping strategy for managing stress, anxiety, and other emotional issues. For some, smoking is viewed as relaxing, taking a break from work, or engaging socially with fellow smokers. This indicates that smoking fulfills various psychological and social functions, reinforcing its place in their everyday lives.

This theme highlights the role smoking plays in the daily lives of the research participants, providing them with a sense of energy and accomplishment daily. For these young adult men, smoking is a regular part of their day that makes them feel happy and complete. This indicates that their addiction to smoking is not solely physical but also psychological, as they have a strong emotional connection to the habit (Caponnetto et al., 2020). This emotional tie can make cessation efforts particularly challenging, as quitting smoking involves addressing both the physical dependency and the emotional fulfillment that smoking provides (Kosendiak et al., 2021).

Pokhrel et al. (2021) found that social and contextual factors, including the belief that smoking completes one's day, contribute significantly to smoking behavior among men, and it suggests that the emotional attachment to smoking may be heightened in specific occupational and social contexts. Similarly, Jussila et al. (2020) found that the perception that smoking completes one's day is associated with smoking behavior as it highlights that the emotional and social attachment to smoking is a significant factor in continued smoking behavior, even when individuals are aware of the health risks associated with smoking.

Theme 2: Smoking Aids My Grossness Feeling After Meal

This theme explores the experiences of research participants who believe that smoking alleviates their feelings of discomfort and grossness after meals. Participants reported that smoking helps them manage the unpleasant sensations that often follow eating, such as bloating or indigestion. For many, smoking after a meal relieves digestion, making it an integral part of their post-meal routine. This habit underscores the psychological and physiological role that smoking plays in their lives, as participants find that smoking after meals helps them feel more comfortable and satisfied. The association between smoking and the alleviation of post-meal discomfort highlights how deeply ingrained this behavior is for some individuals, reflecting its importance in their daily routines and overall well-being.

This theme implies that smoking is deeply integrated into the daily routines of early adult men. This underscores the need to address not only nicotine addiction but also the psychological and habitual aspects of smoking related to post-meal comfort. The association between smoking and relief from digestive discomfort makes cessation particularly challenging, emphasizing the importance of understanding and addressing these specific beliefs and behaviors in smoking cessation programs.

Liyen Cartelle et al. (2023) found that smoking after meals can worsen upper abdominal discomfort in individuals with functional dyspepsia, suggesting the need to avoid smoking, particularly post-eating. Ahmed and Hassan (2021) observed that quitting smoking significantly alleviated after-meal symptoms such as bloating, discomfort, and vomiting in people with gastroesophageal reflux disease, indicating improvements in digestive health post-cessation. Additionally, King et al. (2023) demonstrated that a family-based approach to smoking cessation increased quitting success rates and enhanced family relationships and communication.

Theme 3: Smoking Deceives Me with the Feeling of Relaxation

This theme describes how participants experience a feeling of relaxation when they smoke. They say smoking helps them focus on work and become more productive. Despite this perceived benefit, participants

acknowledge that the sense of relaxation they get from smoking is deceptive. They are aware that while smoking seems to provide temporary relief and mental clarity, it ultimately has detrimental effects on their health. This awareness creates a conflict between the immediate sensation of relaxation and the long-term understanding of the harm caused by smoking. Participants recognize that the feeling of relaxation is short-lived and does not address the underlying stress or anxiety. Yet, they continue to rely on smoking as a quick fix for their immediate needs. This ongoing reliance underscores the psychological grip that smoking has on their routines and mental state.

This implies that the reliance on smoking for relaxation creates a deceptive sense of well-being that masks the severe health risks associated with tobacco use. Over time, this false sense of relaxation can contribute to the development of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, respiratory issues, and various forms of cancer. The psychological dependency formed by associating smoking with relaxation makes it harder for individuals to quit, perpetuating a cycle of addiction and health deterioration.

The relaxing effect of smoking is a complex and often deceptive issue, with conflicting views on its physiological and psychological mechanisms (El-Sherbiny & Elsary, 2022). Dimitriadis et al. (2022) acknowledge the stimulating effect of nicotine on the sympathetic nervous system, suggesting that any perceived relaxation is inconsistent. Torres and O'Dell (2016) further elucidate this inconsistency by explaining that while smoking is often used as a coping strategy for stress, it can contribute to increased stress levels over time. This is because the apparent relaxation from smoking may be due to the alleviation of withdrawal symptoms, such as tension and irritability, rather than a genuine calming effect (Pawlina et al., 2015).

Reasons Early Adult Men Have Difficulty Withdrawing from Their Smoking Habits

As shown in Table 2, the following theme discusses the reasons that early adult men have difficulty withdrawing from their smoking habits.

Theme 1: Fear of Prevailing Diseases During Withdrawal Process

This theme explores the general anxiety experienced by individuals attempting to quit smoking due to the fear of developing smoking-related diseases. Derived from the firsthand experiences of individuals who have tried to quit but encountered significant challenges, it underscores the profound impact of health concerns on smoking cessation efforts. The fear of falling ill during the withdrawal process serves as a barrier to quitting, amplifying the already daunting task of breaking the habit. Participants express deep-seated apprehension regarding the potential adverse health effects of quitting, fearing that the cessation process itself may worsen existing health issues or unveil previously undetected illnesses. This fear is compounded by concerns about withdrawal symptoms, such as weight gain, irritability, and depression, which not only threaten their physical well-being but also contribute to heightened stress and anxiety. The apprehension surrounding the potential health consequences of quitting smoking perpetuates a cycle of fear and uncertainty, further complicating the journey toward smoking cessation.

This implies that the fear amplifies the already challenging process of breaking the habit and contributes to heightened stress and uncertainty. The apprehension regarding the onset or exacerbation of smoking-related diseases during withdrawal underscores the urgent need for comprehensive support mechanisms to address both the physical and psychological aspects of smoking cessation. Failure to effectively address these fears may lead to continued smoking behavior, perpetuating the cycle of tobacco addiction and increasing the risk of developing severe health complications among early adult men.

This confirms the study conducted by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) in which they explained the unbearable nature of nicotine withdrawal symptoms, which can severely impede successful cessation efforts, ultimately leading to relapse. Sadock (2015) further supports this by identifying a positive correlation between the severity of withdrawal symptoms and the level of nicotine dependence. Moreover, Gould (2015) suggests that individuals with higher levels of nicotine dependence are more prone to relapse following a period of abstinence.

Theme 2: My Body Got Used to Its Addictive “Satisfying” Effects

This theme captures the participants' experiences of struggling to withdraw from their smoking habits due to the profoundly ingrained satisfaction they derive from smoking. Participants describe a strong physical and psychological dependency, where their bodies have become accustomed to the pleasurable and addictive effects of nicotine. Despite a genuine desire to quit, they find cessation challenging because smoking provides a sense of immediate satisfaction and relief that their bodies have come to rely on. This dependency creates a cycle where the perceived benefits, such as reduced stress and enhanced mood, reinforce the habit. The participants highlight that their consistent exposure to nicotine has conditioned their bodies to crave its effects, making the withdrawal process not only difficult but also daunting. This theme underscores the powerful hold that the addictive properties of nicotine have on their daily lives, illustrating the internal conflict between the desire to quit and the compelling need to satisfy their cravings.

This implies that the physical and psychological reliance on nicotine creates a formidable barrier to quitting, as the participants' bodies and minds are conditioned to seek the immediate satisfaction that smoking provides. The participants' experiences reflect the powerful grip of nicotine addiction, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions that address both the physical cravings and the psychological conditioning associated with smoking. Understanding this dependency is crucial for developing effective smoking cessation programs that can provide the necessary support to help individuals break free from their addiction and manage the challenging withdrawal process. Without addressing these deeply rooted addictive effects, attempts to quit smoking are likely to face significant hurdles, underscoring the importance of comprehensive treatment strategies that encompass both medical and psychological support.

Further, Kohut (2017) provides a comprehensive analysis of nicotine's mechanisms of action, highlighting how it stimulates the release of dopamine and other neurotransmitters that produce feelings of pleasure and reward. This biochemical process underscores nicotine's high addictiveness, as evidenced by the fact that over 70% of smokers who attempt to quit relapse within a week. Similarly, Froeliger et al. (2013) found that smokers who abstained for 24 hours exhibited increased activity in brain regions associated with reward when compared to their brain activity while smoking. This finding illustrates the strong, rewarding effects of smoking, which significantly contribute to its addictive nature.

Theme 3: Peer Influence Makes It Harder to Quit Smoking!

This theme explores the significant impact of social pressures and peer influence on the difficulty of quitting smoking. Participants described how their smoking behavior is deeply intertwined with their social relationships and interactions. They frequently felt pressured by friends, family, and coworkers to continue smoking, particularly in social settings where smoking is prevalent. This social pressure undermines their efforts to quit, making it challenging to resist the urge to smoke. For many participants, smoking offered social benefits, such as forming friendships and a sense of belonging, which they missed after attempting to quit. The struggle to balance the desire to quit with the need for social connection highlights the influential role of social norms and expectations in maintaining smoking habits. Participants emphasized that the social acceptance and reinforcement of smoking behaviors made it even more challenging to break free from the addiction. Understanding the role of social influence is crucial for developing effective smoking cessation programs that address these social dynamics and provide supportive environments for individuals trying to quit.

This implies that the persistent social pressures and peer influences that make quitting smoking difficult can lead to prolonged smoking habits, which in turn significantly increase the risk of developing chronic health conditions. The social reinforcement of smoking behavior creates a cycle where the need for social acceptance and belonging continues the addiction. Over time, this can result in a deeply entrenched smoking habit that is hard to break, even when the individual is fully aware of the health risks. The psychological impact of social isolation or loneliness that may occur when attempting to quit smoking can lead to increased stress and mental health issues, further complicating cessation efforts.

Baffuno et al. (2020) highlight that peer influence and the environment play crucial roles in maintaining smoking behavior, and interventions incorporating social support from peers are more effective in promoting smoking

cessation. Adkison et al. (2014) found that early adult men are more likely to use alternative nicotine products, such as electronic nicotine delivery systems, if their friends or family members use them, indicating the strong influence of social circles on smoking behavior. Similarly, Harakeh et al. (2014) revealed that both peer and parental factors significantly affect smoking habits; notably, stricter parental rules against smoking are associated with a lower risk of adolescent smoking. Additionally, Song et al. (2014) showed that exposure to smoking in movies increases the likelihood of early adults starting and continuing to smoke, further emphasizing the influential role of media and social influence on smoking behavior.

Theme 4: Continuous Feeling of Extreme Cravings for Smoking

This theme captures the persistent and intense cravings that participants experience when attempting to quit smoking, which is a hallmark of nicotine addiction. Participants reported both physical and psychological cravings that severely hinder their ability to concentrate, sleep, and engage in daily activities. These cravings are often triggered by specific situations, such as being around other smokers, consuming alcohol, or encountering stressful circumstances. The participants described these cravings as overwhelming and challenging to manage, emphasizing that the constant desire to smoke is a significant barrier to quitting. This theme illustrates the powerful and relentless nature of nicotine cravings, which dominate their thoughts and actions, making the process of cessation extremely challenging.

This implies that the persistent and intense cravings experienced by the participants not only impede their immediate efforts to quit but also pose a substantial risk for relapse, prolonging the cycle of addiction. The constant struggle with cravings also has psychological implications, contributing to stress, anxiety, and a diminished quality of life. The inability to successfully quit smoking due to these cravings can result in feelings of frustration and helplessness, negatively impacting mental health.

Tidey & Miller (2015) found that certain types of cigarettes can deliver higher levels of nicotine, potentially leading to stronger cravings and making quitting more difficult. Krishnan-Sarin et al. (2014) demonstrated that behavioral impulsivity predicts treatment outcomes in adolescent smoking cessation programs, indicating that managing impulsivity and cravings is vital for success. Weinberger et al. (2017) highlighted that smoking is associated with an increased risk of relapse into substance use disorders, likely due to persistent cravings for nicotine and other substances. Zhou et al. (2014) showed that smoking cravings can be triggered by exposure to cigarette-related cues, underscoring the importance of identifying and avoiding these triggers. These findings align with participants' experiences of intense and continuous cravings, highlighting the need for strategies that specifically address cravings to support successful long-term smoking cessation.

Theme 5: Difficulty in Regulating Psychological and Emotional Responses during Smoking Withdrawal Process

This theme emphasizes the psychological and emotional challenges faced by early adult men attempting to quit smoking. Participants described experiencing intense symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and trouble concentrating, which were difficult to manage. They feel overwhelmed by their emotional responses, including heightened irritability and anger, making it challenging to maintain control over their behavior. These emotional struggles often led to a sense of frustration and helplessness, further complicating their efforts to quit smoking. Participants also noted that the emotional instability they experienced during the withdrawal process made it hard to stay motivated and committed to cessation. The difficulty in regulating these psychological and emotional responses was a significant barrier, as the participants often found themselves turning back to smoking to cope with these intense feelings. This theme highlights the profound emotional and psychological toll of smoking withdrawal, which can undermine efforts to quit and sustain long-term abstinence.

This implies that the emotional and psychological challenges during smoking withdrawal significantly hinder the participant's ability to quit successfully. The intense symptoms of anxiety, depression, and difficulty concentrating create a sense of distress and overwhelm, making it exceedingly difficult for individuals to maintain control over their emotions and behaviors. This heightened emotional instability not only undermines their motivation and commitment to cessation but also increases the risk of relapse as individuals seek relief from

their emotional turmoil through smoking. The persistent struggle to regulate these responses may worsen feelings of frustration and helplessness, further impeding progress toward long-term abstinence.

Weinstein et al. (2015) demonstrated that mindfulness training can improve stress attribution, coping mechanisms, and emotional well-being, crucial aspects for individuals struggling to regulate their emotions during smoking cessation. Additionally, Klucharev et al. (2013) found that down-regulation of the posterior medial frontal cortex, involved in emotion regulation, can reduce social conformity, potentially mitigating the impact of social norms on smoking behavior. These findings suggest that interventions incorporating emotion regulation strategies, such as mindfulness-based interventions and targeting social influences through cognitive approaches, may effectively support individuals quitting smoking.

4.1. Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. Firstly, purposive sampling may introduce bias and limit the generalizability of the results to other populations. Additionally, the geographical restriction to a specific location in the Philippines and the age range limitation of 22-35 years may further constrain the applicability of the findings. The study's exclusive focus on early adult men overlooks potential differences in experiences among other demographics. Resource constraints and potential researcher influence during data collection also pose limitations. Further, this study does not include an analysis of sociodemographic factors within the sample, which limits the understanding of how variables such as socioeconomic status, education level, and cultural background might influence smoking behaviors and cessation efforts.

4.2. Conclusions

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics surrounding smoking behavior among early adult men. Despite their awareness of the harmful health consequences associated with smoking, participants continue to engage in this behavior for various reasons. Smoking serves as an integral part of their daily routine, providing a sense of completion and satisfaction, which aligns with previous research on habitual smoking (Struik et al., 2018). Additionally, many participants rely on smoking to alleviate discomfort after meals or to create a deceptive sense of transient relaxation, echoing findings from Benedict et al. (2022) that emphasize the psychological aspects of smoking addiction.

These insights underscore the nature of smoking addiction, highlighting its psychological, social, and habitual components that contribute to its persistence. Furthermore, this study reveals significant challenges faced by early adult men in their attempts to withdraw from smoking. The addictive nature of nicotine, coupled with peer influence, emerges as a daunting barrier to cessation. Participants struggle with intense cravings and have difficulty regulating their emotional and psychological responses during the withdrawal process, reflecting the broader struggles documented in the literature (Bechara et al., 2019).

This research emphasizes the necessity for comprehensive and tailored interventions to support smoking cessation efforts among this demographic. Effective strategies should aim not only to educate individuals about the health risks of smoking but also to address the underlying psychological, social, and environmental factors that sustain these habits. Proposed interventions may include mindfulness training to manage cravings, cognitive-behavioral therapy to enhance emotional regulation, and peer support programs to counteract social influences. By addressing the challenges identified in this study, policymakers, healthcare providers, and public health professionals can work towards reducing smoking prevalence and improving health outcomes for early adult men and the broader population.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of smoking behavior among early adult men, highlighting the intricate interplay of factors influencing their addiction and withdrawal experiences. The insights provided here can serve as a foundation for future research and intervention development to effectively reduce smoking rates within this population.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authors' contributions

Junalyn N. Suminguit: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal Analysis, Research, Data Curation, Project Management. Ruben L. Tagare, Jr.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Writing - Review and Editing, Supervision, Project Management. Cheeze R. Janito: Conceptualization, Supervision, Project Management. Marlene E. Orfrecio: Conceptualization, Supervision, Project Management.

Declaration of Data Availability

All data relevant to this study are fully available within this article. Additional materials and information supporting the findings can be provided upon reasonable request.

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