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The future of Indonesian tobacco children: Implications for tobacco control policy

Abstract

This study aims to explore the Indonesian public perception towards the ethics of tobacco marketing activities, and their implications on young people. Six focus groups and thirty personal interviews were conducted in eight urban villages in Yogyakarta, Indonesia to gather data. The findings indicate that the majority of participants believe that tobacco marketing activities are directly and indirectly targeted at young people, and therefore considered to be unethical. Children and teenagers are perceived to be vulnerable groups who do not understand the persuasiveness of marketing methods and messages adopted by cigarette companies. The study is concluded by offering a number of tobacco control measures that prioritise the well-being of these vulnerable groups.

Introduction/Background

In 2010, the world discovered the “smoking baby” who at only two years old was smoking almost 40 cigarettes per day. Following significant media attention, he was rehabilitated by a local charity and, at only four years old, became the youngest person in the world to receive tobacco addiction treatment. Six years after the worldwide media attention, not much has changed. Recently the media broadcasted a six-year-old Indonesian boy who was praised by his parents for scaling back his nicotine intake from two packs to five cigarettes a day (Chan 2015). It is not uncommon to witness underage Indonesian children smoking cigarettes. Over the past 20 years, the number of children aged 10 to 14 who smoke has doubled and it has at least tripled for five- to nine-year-old children (Dhumieres 2015).

The fact that the tobacco industry has been one of the principal sources of tax revenue for the Indonesian government has given it considerable political and financial influence (Amin 2015). There are limited restrictions placed on cigarette advertising and marketing activities in Indonesia, but even those that exist are frequently disregarded by the cigarette firms. Indonesia is the only country in South East Asia that has not ratified the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). The leniency of Indonesia’s tobacco marketing regulations results in local and global tobacco companies aggressively expanding their operations (Tjandra et al. 2014). The aggressiveness of tobacco marketing in Indonesia is in line with the increase of smoking prevalence amongst adolescents in Indonesia (Prabandari & Dewi 2016). A recent study finds that 20 per cent of Indonesian adolescents aged 13-15 years old are currently smoking (World Health Organisation 2015). Furthermore, even though Indonesian boys between 13 and 17 years old can repeat the health warnings on cigarette packs, they believe smoking one to two packs per day is not harmful to health (Barber et al. 2008). This study aims to explore the Indonesian public’s perceptions towards the ethics of tobacco marketing, and its direct and indirect implications on young people. Whilst past studies have investigated Indonesian adolescents’ smoking perception and behaviour (e.g. Ng et al. 2007), and perception towards cigarette advertising (e.g. Prabandari & Dewi 2016), only a limited number of studies have explored the Indonesian public’s perception towards the ethics of tobacco marketing (Tjandra et al. 2015) and its implications for young people.

Cigarette companies tend to design marketing strategies which are aimed at young potential smokers, targeting them not only with pro-tobacco messages, but also with sales promotional features (e.g. King & Siegel 1999). This is one of the main reasons that WHO promotes bans on advertising, promotion and sponsorship as a mechanism to address global tobacco epidemic (Henriksen 2012). Adults may choose to smoke, even if they are well-informed about the danger of cigarettes. They may smoke for various reasons such as to alleviate anxiety, combat weight gain or simply for pleasure. In most contexts, adults are permitted to make harmful choices that are primarily self-regarding (Thomas & Gostin 2013). Nevertheless, the ethical implications of marketing campaigns directed at well-informed customers are different to those targeted at children, who may not be able to make well-informed decisions, and who may not understand the persuasive content of advertising (Nicholls & Cullen 2004). Furthermore, teenagers' intention to smoke can be linked to their receptivity of advertising (e.g. Hanewinkel et al. 2010). In particular, Ng et al. (2007) find that Indonesian boys perceived smoking as a way to reaffirm their identity as a man.

In order to reduce children's exposure to tobacco marketing campaigns, the Indonesian government advises that cigarette advertising on TV and radio is restricted to the hours between 21:30 and 05:00 local time. Despite this restriction, children are still exposed to aggressive cigarette advertisements on street billboards, or during sporting events and music concerts. Children may also see cigarette logos during the sporting events and music concerts, which are not broadcasted on television. According to a survey conducted by Indonesian National Commission on Children Protection (Komnas Anak), 93 per cent of Indonesian children are exposed to cigarette advertisements on television, and 50 per cent regularly see cigarette advertisement on outdoor billboards and banners (Sagita 2013). In recent years, Indonesian cigarette companies also incorporated sponsorship and CSR into their marketing strategies to help augment any negative image associated with the harmful nature of their products. A recent study suggests that CSR activities can encourage Indonesian customers' positive perceptions towards cigarette companies (Arli et al. 2015). Nevertheless, it must be questioned whether cigarette companies are sincere in their motives to better society (Yoon et al. 2006). This study explores how the Indonesian public perceive the ethics of tobacco marketing activities, and their implications on children and teenagers.

Method

The paper adopted qualitative methods through focus group and individual interviews with smokers and non-smokers. The study was conducted in eight urban villages (kelurahan) in the city of Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Brontokusuman, Catur Tunggal, Gedongkiwo, Gondokusuman, Keparakan, Muja Muju Patangpuluhan, Rejowinangun and Wirobrajan. Community leaders of these districts were contacted in advance to help the researchers recruiting potential participants. In general, participants have different backgrounds in terms of age, gender, occupations, and interest. There were 41 participants for the focus group consisting of five groups of 7 and one group of 6. Focus group participants were categorised into three groups of smokers and three groups of non-smokers. The number of interview participants was 30, which consisted of 15 smokers and 15 non-smokers. The qualitative data was analysed thematically by using Nvivo's software.

Results

The findings presented in this paper are a part of a larger study which evaluates Indonesian public perception towards the ethics of tobacco marketing. One of the main themes identified in the study is the participants' concern over cigarette advertising, promotion and sponsorship that directly and indirectly target children. A participant summarised, "if children are addicted to cigarettes, how are they going to be like in 10-year time? If young children already smoke five cigarettes, in the future, they will become heavy smokers. In my village, children age six and seven already smoke."

The majority of the focus group and interview participants explain their concern over cigarette advertising that cover up the danger of cigarettes, "Even though there is a warning that smoking kills, cigarette advertisements still show that cigarettes are safe. I think cigarette advertisements are not entirely ethical. They cover up the real effects of cigarettes". They believe that the cover up and hidden messages in cigarette advertising could mislead children and teenagers, because they do not understand the persuasive content of cigarette advertising, as suggested by a participant "Children and teenagers, they do not think about things many times. They will think about it only once and how cigarettes make them happy".

A number of smokers and non-smokers in the study comment on how cigarette advertising does not influence their intention to smoke. However, they believe that cigarette advertising is targeted at young people by promoting attractive themes, such as enthusiasm, persistence, bravery, identity, enjoyment, masculinity, success, politics, humour, youth, adventure, bravery, adventure and family. Participants gave various examples on how these themes also impose desired identities that could attract young people who are in the journey of finding their identity. For instance, "When seeing a cigarette advertisement with a slogan "Men have a taste" [i.e. Gudang Garam International brand], teenagers in their puberty, may think that I want to look like an adult or more masculine, so I will smoke that cigarette".

The majority of participants also comment about the broadcasting time and channel of advertisements. Despite cigarette TV advertisement being permitted to broadcast only between 9.30 pm and 5am (bedtime for children), there is concern about advertising through non-electronic modes. The participants suggest that "The restriction does not have much impact. Children who don't watch TV during the restriction hours already know about cigarettes because of the environment around them. In their environment, cigarette advertisements are very common. They go to shops, they can easily see cigarette advertisements being displayed". Furthermore, restriction of cigarette TV advertising might become less effective because children are also being exposed to tobacco marketing in a subtle way of sport, music and education sponsorship as well as corporate social responsibility (CSR). The participants argue that these activities are intended to build their positive image among young people. Furthermore, they have witnessed infringements where cigarette companies giving out free packs of cigarettes to adults, as well as children, "This is not good for the young people. Because usually for music concerts, they buy tickets and get cigarettes in return. It's the same like selling cigarettes but using the concert as a cover up. There is a hidden agenda".

The majority of participants comment that sponsorship and CSR activities directly and indirectly target young people. Whilst some participants recognise the financial power of cigarette companies, others argue that cigarette companies' contribution through sponsorship and CSR activities is only a small percentage of their profit, and therefore "[they] are not pro-society. They only care about making profits and don't bring benefits to the society at all".

Perhaps much more subtly, participants suspect that sales of a single unit of cigarette is another channel that particularly reaches children. Selling single cigarettes has been favourable in making buying cigarette more affordable, and in enabling sellers to fulfil market demands of people with lower income. But the concern is that this approach opens an opportunity for children and teenagers to buy cigarettes quite easily. Despite the formal regulation prohibiting selling of cigarettes to anyone under 18 years old, participants have witnessed many infringements, deliberately or not, of this regulation.

“I think it will be difficult to do anything about selling individual cigarettes. If there are regulations, it could be different. If the sellers do not want to sell cigarettes to children, it's their right. But to stop them, I think it depends on their own awareness. Parents should stop the children [buying cigarettes]. I don't think we can blame the sellers because it's the parents who ask their children to buy cigarettes. The children can say to people that his dad told him to buy cigarettes. So, I don't think the regulations can stop that.”

Discussion and implications for tobacco control policy

Utilising qualitative research methods, this paper has aimed to explore how the Indonesian public perceive the ethicality of tobacco marketing, more specifically, in relation to young people. The findings will become the foundation of proposing a number of stricter tobacco control policy that prioritises young people's well-being. The findings indicate that the majority of participants believe that cigarette advertising, promotion and sponsorship are targeted at young people, and therefore considered to be unethical. Confirming past studies (McNeal, 1992; Nicholls & Cullen, 2004), almost all participants considered children and teenagers to be more vulnerable and less able to understand the persuasive content of cigarette advertising. The participants comment that the exposure of Indonesian teenagers and children to cigarettes and its marketing activities, combined with their lack of awareness about the harm cigarettes can have a negative impact on their quality of life from an early age. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the Indonesian children and the future generation, that the Indonesian government must adopt stricter measures on the country's tobacco control policy.

The Indonesian tobacco control regulations imply that cigarette advertisements should not show cigarettes, cigarette packs, or the use of cigarettes or tobacco. However, tobacco marketers have been creative in sidestepping these restrictions, by endorsing themes that are attractive to young people. The participants believe that cigarette advertising does not influence their intention to smoke, instead they suggest that cigarette advertisements are intended for young people. Furthermore, they also believe that the attractive themes, imposition of desired identity and cover up of the danger of cigarettes could mislead young people and encourage them to smoke. The majority of participants suggest that the restriction of broadcasting cigarette advertisements at 9.30pm – 5.00 am was inadequate as cigarette advertisements are also accessible through non-electronic modes, such as in the social media and billboards. Based on these findings, it is evident that cigarette advertisements are perceived by the Indonesian public to have more detrimental effects on young people than adults. As suggested by Hanewinkel et al. (2010), the exposure of cigarette advertisements have an impact on adolescents' smoking behaviour and intention to smoke. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that the Indonesian government must implement a complete ban of any form of cigarette advertisements.

Past studies found that cigarette companies utilise sponsorships and CSR to enhance their image and maintain legitimacy with the public, press, and regulators who are increasingly against their business practice (e.g. Jura & Velasco 2011). The current regulations allow tobacco companies to engage in sponsorship and CSR activities if the contribution does not use tobacco product trademarks and logos, and does not intend to promote a tobacco product. In addition to witnessing a number of infringement of these activities, the participants comment that sponsorships as well as CSR activities are intended to project the companies' positive image amongst young people. Whilst participants suggest that this is not ideal and unethical, they recognise to have the financial capabilities of funding these activities. Nevertheless, some participants further argue that the money spent on the sponsorship and CSR activities is only a small proportion of their overall profit. Therefore, the activities do not benefit the society at large. By funding sponsorship and CSR activities targeted at young people, the intention of cigarette companies is not about contributing to the society, instead, it is about marketing their harmful products to vulnerable groups. Therefore, in line with the WHO's suggestion, the Indonesian government must consider banning cigarette companies' sponsorship and CSR activities which become a marketing vehicle to build its popularity and positive image among young people.

Even though there is a restriction for selling cigarettes to children and teenagers under the age of 18, participants have witnessed retailers selling cigarettes to children and teenagers. The participants believe that without the awareness and willingness of the parents, retailers, and members of the public, the regulations alone are not adequate to stop young people's access to cigarettes. Indonesian children with low budgets can easily access individual cigarettes as cheap as USD 0.05, or purchase a pack for USD 1. Therefore, the Indonesian regulators must increase cigarette prices so that it will be too expensive for children and teenagers to buy. By increasing the cigarette tax, the Indonesian government may be able to use the funds to help tobacco growers and workers to switch to a different industry. It is evident that the Indonesian government needs to increase the public's awareness about the danger of smoking to children and implement stricter regulations and penalties for selling cigarettes to children and teenagers. Enforcing severe penalties to retailers who sell cigarettes to children and teenagers can reduce the underage cigarette sales. Whilst the pictorial warning on cigarette packaging could educate young people about the detrimental effects of smoking, plain cigarette packaging and banning the display of cigarettes in shops will make it harder for cigarette companies to use its packaging as a marketing tool.

This study presents that the Indonesian public perceive tobacco marketing activities that directly and indirectly target young people are unethical. This finding provides support for the Indonesian government to adopt stronger tobacco control measures. Long-term cigarette smokers started when they were children and the detrimental health, social and economic impacts of smoking have been recorded in the literature. We propose that in order to change Indonesian young people's perception and attitudes towards smoking and to protect their future, the government must remove their access to cigarettes as well as its marketing activities. This study provides insight on the Indonesian public's perception towards the ethics of tobacco marketing activities in relation to young people. Future research should explore Indonesian young people's perception towards the ethics of tobacco marketing and its effects on smoking perception and behaviour.

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