



### **Title of the paper**

An exploration of the Indonesian public perceptions of the ethics of tobacco advertising

### **Conference track**

Reducing the impact of addiction including substance, misuse alcohol, tobacco and gambling

### **Abstract**

This paper aims to explore the Indonesian public perceptions of the ethics of tobacco advertising. 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 advertising is unethical. Participants recognised that to attract their primary target market, young male consumers, tobacco advertising adopted attractive themes such as enthusiasm, persistence, bravery, enjoyment, masculinity, success, humour, youth, adventure and family. Most participants also believed that tobacco advertising is targeted at children and teenagers who do not understand the underlying messages of tobacco advertising. The study is concluded by offering a number of implications for tobacco advertising policy in Indonesia.

### **Introduction and background / rationale**

Indonesia is the biggest economy in Southeast Asia with a population over 260 million people. One of the greatest strengths of the country is its young population with 37% of the population is under the age of 20 (Asian Correspondent, 2017) but its potential and productivity are threatened by the number of deaths associated with smoking. It is estimated that smoking kills 240,618 Indonesians every year, approximately 659 per day (Tan & Dorotheo, 2016). Indonesia has the highest number of male smoking prevalence Southeast Asia. 64.9% male adults aged 15 and above and 20.3% youth aged 13-15 currently smoke (Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, 2017). More alarmingly 19.8% youth tried a cigarette before the age of 10 and nearly 88.6% tried a cigarette before the age of 13.

The revenue of the Indonesian tobacco industry in 2019 is almost USD 22.6 billion and it is expected to grow annually by 4.5% (Statista, 2019). In 2016 Indonesia sold more than 316 billion cigarettes, making it the biggest cigarette market in Southeast Asia and the second biggest market in the world after China (Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, 2017). The industry contributes to approximately 10% of Indonesian tax revenue (Danubrata & Reinard, 2017) and 96% of excise tax revenue (Lianto, 2017).

Indonesia is the only country in Asia that has not signed and ratified the Framework Convention of Tobacco Control (FCTC) (WHO, 2017). FCTC recognises that a complete ban on tobacco marketing activities is the most effective way of reducing youth smoking uptake. However, the Indonesian government believes that stricter tobacco control policy could be detrimental to the industry, especially for the farmers and other associated tobacco workers (Asian Correspondent, 2017).

Although the majority of Southeast Asian countries, have adopted a comprehensive ban and made significant progress to restrict tobacco marketing activities, Indonesian tobacco control policy remains lenient. Indonesia is the only country in Southeast Asia that allows direct



tobacco advertising (The Jakarta Post, 2017). In 2016 Indonesia's tobacco industry spent US\$474 million on television advertising, with the biggest industry spenders being Djarum – \$143 million, Gudang Garam – \$99 million, and HM Sampoerna (PMI) – \$94 million (Adstensity in SEATCA, 2011). Four out of ten most popular brands in Indonesia are tobacco brands, A Mild (PMI), Djie Sam Soe (PMI), Gudang Garam and Marlboro (PMI) (Millward Brown, 2018). To reduce children and teenager's exposure, tobacco advertising on Indonesian TV and radio is restricted to between 21:30 and 05:00 local time. However, young people are still exposed to aggressive tobacco advertising at roadside stalls, on billboards and music concerts, on the internet, late night on TV and at sporting events (Boseley, Collyns, & Dhillon, 2018). In fact, shops and restaurants branded with tobacco advertising are everywhere.

At the bottom line, ethical perceptions and ethics itself are broadly related to morality or responsibility towards others' well-being (Wittmer, 2000). Past authors suggest that ethical perception or recognition is the first and critical step in the ethical decision making process (Ferrell, Gresham, & Fraedrich, 1989; Ho, 2010; Jones, 1991; Wittmer, 2000). To make an ethical decision, an individual must first recognise that a decision making situation has an ethical content (Ho, 2010). Interestingly, despite its genuine importance, ethical perceptions amongst people within a society have been given less attention compared to ethical perceptions within an organisation or business context (Ferrell, Fraedrich, & Ferrell, 2015; Ho, 2010; Hunt & Vitell, 2006; Jones, 1991; Weaver & Trevino, 1994). Whilst past studies have investigated Indonesian adolescents' smoking perception and behaviour (Ng, Weinehall, & Öhman, 2007) and perceptions of tobacco advertising (Prabandari & Dewi, 2016) only a limited number of studies have explored the Indonesian public perceptions of the ethics of tobacco advertising. The leniency of Indonesia's tobacco control policy provides a unique context to investigate how the public perceives the ethics of tobacco advertising.

### **Aim of the session**

This study aims to evaluate the Indonesian public perceptions of the ethics of tobacco advertising.

### **Method / approach**

Qualitative methods, focus group and individual interviews with smokers and non-smokers, were adopted in this study. The study was conducted in eight urban villages (*kelurahan*) in the city of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Community leaders were contacted in advance to help the researchers recruiting potential participants. In general, participants have different backgrounds in terms of age, gender, occupations, and interests. Forty-one participants participated in the focus groups, categorised into three groups of smokers and three groups of non-smokers. Thirty participants, fifteen smokers and fifteen non-smokers participated in the interviews. The qualitative data was analysed thematically by using Nvivo's software.

### **Findings and discussion**

#### **Perceived deception in tobacco advertising**

Many tobacco activities were perceived to be unethical because of the alleged intention to cover up the dangers 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” (Interview, male, 19 years, non-smoker).

The covering up was felt by participants to occur through advertisements which used a variety of aspirational tropes to engage young people and persuade them to smoke. The tropes mentioned by participants included enthusiasm, persistence, bravery, enjoyment, masculinity, success, humour, youth, adventure and family.

The advertisements are not related to cigarettes. For example, like somebody is trying to run, trying to catch something. That’s why it’s [the slogan is] ‘don’t quit, do it’. Nothing to do with smoking, something like smoking is something different. But at the end, they emphasise that it is about ... [cigarette brand 4]. A lot of cigarette adverts do that, because they can’t show people smoking (Interview, female, 25 years, non-smoker).

Perhaps more appealing, the messages implied in cigarette advertisements attempt to project a positive identity. Many participants argued that these messages were not true or real.

I think cigarette advertisements look good. But that’s it. From the ethical perspective, it’s not ethical. They combine bravery and smoking. So, it seems like when you smoke, you will be brave, but in reality, it’s not like that. So, I don’t think it’s ethical. A lot of brainwash, distorting the facts. If you smoke you become brave. In reality, they don’t (Interview, female, 36 years, non-smoker).

Furthermore, while these implicit messages do not necessarily breach regulations, they have been creatively hidden under symbolic representation, which in turn can be interpreted in various ways by audiences. Simply, the symbolic representation may mislead the interpretation.

The taglines are hidden in symbols. They are very creative. Creating symbolic advertisements that can easily be understood by people but at the same time does not breach regulations. Hidden messages in tobacco advertising cannot be avoided because it is creative. I don’t think it can be regulated. The visual images can be regulated. For example, you can’t show a smoking person, or children or women in cigarette advertisement. But because the messages are symbolic, they will not get them. But the taglines, how can you stop them? Like “men are tasteful”, it has a broad definition. You can interpret them in different ways (Interview, male, 30 years, non-smoker).

As a summary, the theme links the ethics of cigarette marketing with the intention to cover up the dangers associated with smoking. This covering up operates through adverts, the use of various aspirational tropes, projection of positive identity and symbolic representation. Tobacco advertising was perceived to be intentionally not balanced in giving information about smoking: promoting positive images much more strongly than informing consumers of the negative risks.



### **Tobacco advertising targeted at young people**

A number of smokers and non-smokers in the study commented on how cigarette advertising did not influence their intention to smoke, but would attract young people. Young people were susceptible to advertising that emphasised that smoking makes someone seem to be grown up for example, "Children will not understand hidden messages in the advertisements. These are unethical. Some of them may give positive encouragement in life, but I don't think it's good. In general, the advertisements are not ethical" (Interview, male, 30, non-smoker). Almost all the participants discussed the impact of cigarettes on the wellbeing of children and teenagers. Many participants considered children and teenagers to be vulnerable as they could not understand the content and intention of cigarette marketing. The vulnerability or weakness was the underlying basis for the majority of participants in stating their concerns about cigarette marketing that directly and indirectly targeted children and young people.

Children and teenagers, they do not think about things many times. They will think about it only once and cigarettes make them happy. To increase the sales of cigarettes they will target young people. In the end of the year, their graduation will be sponsored by cigarette companies. Their farewell party is sponsored by cigarette companies. If children are addicted to cigarettes, how are they going to be like in 10-year time? In the education world [they are influenced by cigarettes] and health too. 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 (Interview, male, 31 years, non-smoker).

Participants also noted the broadcasting times and television channels where adverts were broadcast. Despite regulations restricting cigarette TV advertising to between 9.30 pm to 5am, participants were still worried about similar non-televised advertising.

### **Discussion and implications to tobacco advertising policy**

Adopting qualitative research methods, this paper has aimed to explore how the Indonesian public perceive the ethicality of tobacco advertising. The findings will become the foundation of proposing a number of stricter tobacco advertising policy.

Participants felt that there was deception in tobacco marketing activities and were able to specify how this takes place. Participants perceived that advertising which used aspirational tropes, positive identities and symbolic representation were intended to hide the real danger of smoking. Participants recognised that tobacco advertising used themes such as enthusiasm, persistence, bravery, enjoyment, masculinity, success, humour, youth, adventure and family, which were considered to be attractive to their primary target market, young male consumers.

The ethical perspective applies to products that are considered harmful as well as unethical methods of marketing these products (Hackley, Tiwsakul, & Preuss, 2008). Tobacco advertisements could be seen deceptive, because they appear to glamorise the temporary pleasure customers get from smoking but say nothing about the products well-known danger to health. The findings of our study illustrates that this deception leads to the participants' distrust in their cigarette marketing messages. Laczniaak and Murphy (2006) further imply that deception in marketing practices also violates the principle of virtue ethics because an



efficient marketplace is built upon trust and this characteristic must be nurtured by marketers' honesty.

In addition, some participants also noticed that the current regulations cannot restrict the content of advertising which does directly invite people to take up smoking. Consequently, cigarette companies can freely cover up the risk of smoking to audiences. While this perhaps does not directly breach the regulations, the covering up intention suggests a lack of sense of virtue ethics and deontology from the cigarette companies and marketers. More specifically, the ethicality which links to the allegation that cigarette advertising intentionally communicates misleading information about smoking by promoting positive images much more strongly than informing of the negative risks.

The theme of targeting children and young people shows that participants emphasised a need for tobacco marketers to uphold a moral responsibility by not selling cigarettes to children. More intriguingly, the theme suggests people's suspicion of cigarette firms manipulating the vulnerability of children and young people. Confirming past studies (McNeal, 1992; Nicholls & Cullen, 2004), almost all participants considered children and young people to be more vulnerable and less able to understand the persuasive content of cigarette advertising. The participants commented that the exposure of children and young people to cigarette 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.

Whilst the Indonesian tobacco control regulations imply that tobacco advertisements should not show cigarettes, cigarette packs, or the use of cigarettes or tobacco, 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. The attractive content of tobacco advertisements could be counteracted by developing anti-smoking advertisements that contain equally or more attractive tobacco advertisements. In addition, educational interventions which aim to build the public's resilience against tobacco advertising messages could minimise the impact of tobacco advertising on individuals' smoking intention.



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