

# Children's Perceptions of Cigarette Advertisements

J Rogayah, MHPEd\*, A Zulkifli, MPH\*\*, M Razlan, MPH\*\* NN Naing, MPH\*\*, \*Department of Medical Education, \*\*Department of Community Medicine, School of Medical Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 16150 Kota Bharu, Kelantan

## Summary

A total of 159 Primary Six children from two schools in Kota Bharu were studied on their perception of advertisements, and in particular indirect cigarette advertisements found in local magazines. The most frequent source of advertisements these children were exposed to were the television (86.2%), the newspaper (69.2%) and the radio (59.1%). Cigarette advertisements form only a small portion of three 'favourite' and three 'worst' advertisements listed by the children. There were 15 responses listing 'cigarette advertisement' as one of their 'most unpopular' advertisement. Although the majority of the children responded that the advertisements were advertising non-cigarette products, 28.8% of the children identified the advertisements as promoting cigarettes. This was higher among the female children (29.3%) as compared to the male children (28.4%). Our findings highlight the need to consider a complete ban on all forms of cigarette advertisements so that schoolchildren are not influenced and prompted by indirect cigarette advertising to smoke.

*Key Words:* Smoking, Cigarette, Advertisements, Schoolchildren

## Introduction

Going to school is the thrust activity of most children between the ages of 7 and 17 years and it is the place where they socialize outside their home environment for the first time. Studies have demonstrated that secondary school age is a critical period in the formation of smoking habits<sup>1</sup>. Experimenting with cigarettes often begins during childhood or early adolescence and there is usually a period of 1.5 - 2 years between initiation and the establishment of the habit<sup>2,3</sup>. The smoking habit of schoolchildren has been extensively studied in various developing countries and has been found to be a growing problem<sup>4</sup>.

Cigarette advertising is an organised, planned, deliberate and often highly researched attempt to promote smoking. The aim of advertising is to create and reinforce associations with smoking that will increase sales of cigarettes. All of the association of smoking propagated, like associations of luxury,

international travel, excitement, sexuality, companionship, uniqueness, relaxation and sports are associations that have nothing intrinsically to do with tobacco or smoking. They are all associations which arise because advertising has constantly attached such meaning to cigarettes in the effort to appeal to very ordinary human emotions, hopes and yearnings.

In Malaysia, cigarette advertising in the media is subject to the Control of Tobacco Products Regulations 1993. Direct cigarette advertisements on television, newspaper and magazines is banned although indirect advertisement is allowed. This entails the use of the already established logos, symbols or labels of well known cigarettes in advertisements for designer clothings and accessories, travels and tours, music concerts and the sponsorship of sports events. Critics have claimed that there should be a complete ban on cigarette advertisements as it is contended that consumer interest in smoking is fanned through association with the brand name and the related

attractive or glamorous lifestyle it advocates<sup>5,6</sup>. The concern is that viewers, particularly schoolchildren, may be influenced to take up smoking.

There is little empirical evidence that advertisements for cigarettes often employ images which are attractive to the young. Most accounts which claim to show how cigarette advertisements link smoking with success, glamour, fun and masculinity apparently assume that there is a single interpretation or decoding of an advertisement. Although several of these advertisements are very convincing, for example, few would deny that the cowboys portrayed in a cigarette advertisement are promoting masculinity, this interpretation would be more convincing if they had been subjected to some kind of empirical testing.

The study described here therefore examined schoolchildren in Primary 6 on their perceptions of indirect cigarette advertisements currently found in some magazines in Malaysia.

### Methodology

A total of 159 schoolchildren were studied. These children were from 4 classes from two primary schools. The children were about 12 years of age. The schools were conveniently sampled from the areas close to the USM medical campus in Kota Bharu. After discussions with the teachers, it was felt that children from the top classes were able to read and understand the questionnaire and provide more reliable responses. The top two classes of children in Primary 6 from each school were then selected.

Twelve full page colour advertisements taken from magazines were fixed to black cardboard mounts. Slides of each advertisements were also prepared. Eight of the advertisements were indirect cigarette advertisements while four were non-cigarette advertisements. They were shown in random order so as not to make the children suspect the purpose of the study.

All the children in the selected classes who were present during the day of the investigation were given a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 2 parts. The first part provided a warm-up session where the children were enquired on their understanding of the purpose of advertisements, the common sources of advertisement and their selection of popular and unpopular advertisements. In the second part, questions were directed towards their interpretation of each of the advertisements shown and who it was targeted for. Their impression of the advertisements, whether they like it or not, was also asked. The children were given ample time to answer the questions. Analysis for the second part of the questionnaire was only done on the children's responses to the eight indirect cigarette advertisements shown.

### Results

There were a total of 159 children participating in the study, consisting of 86 boys and 73 girls. Most of the children were about 12-years-old. Table I shows the most frequent source of advertisement that the students were exposed to. The three most frequent sources of advertisements were the television, the radio

**Table I**  
**Most frequent source of advertisements for Primary 6 children\***

	TV	Newspapers	Radio	Magazines	Signboards	Others
Male	74	62	50	22	5	22
Female	63	48	44	23	2	7
Total	137	110	94	45	7	29

\* multiple responses allowed

and the newspapers. Advertisement from magazines, as used in this study, was the fourth most frequent source of advertisements for these children. There was no significant difference between male and female children in the common sources of advertisements they were exposed to.

The children were also asked to list 3 of their most popular advertisements and 3 of their most unpopular advertisements, to note if any of the indirect cigarette advertisements were listed by the children (Table II). There were only 7 male children compared to 12 female children who had at least 1 indirect cigarette advertisement listed among their popular advertisements. However, there were more children (16 male and 16 female) who wrote 1 direct cigarette advertisement and there were 1 male and 4 female children who wrote 2 indirect cigarette advertisements as among their most unpopular advertisements. There were a total of 15 students, who listed 'cigarette advertisements' as among their most unpopular advertisements without naming any particular brand of cigarette.

The children were probed further on their perception of the indirect cigarette advertisements shown. They were asked on their understanding and whether they liked the advertisements shown. Their responses were assessed to note whether the children were able to understand and interpret the indirect cigarette

advertisements. The responses were grouped as follows: 1. advertising cigarettes; 2. advertising non-cigarette products; 3. advertising other products felt by children, but not shown on the advertisement; 4. did not understand the advertisement (Table III).

Of the total 1241 responses, 624 (50.3%) liked the indirect cigarette advertisements shown while 617 (49.7%) did not like the advertisements. The reasons given for disliking the advertisements were analysed. Only 192 of the 617 responses (20.1%) responded that 'it is bad for health'. The majority of the responses gave other non-health reasons for disliking the advertisement, which include 'potrayal is against religious and social norms'. There were only 11 responses (1.7%) liking the advertisement because the 'activities shown were fun'.

There were 404 responses (42.5%) which felt that these indirect cigarette advertisements were promoting non-cigarette products. However, there were 274 responses (28.8%) who felt that these advertisements were promoting cigarettes (Table III), while 28.7% did not understand the advertisement.

Results on questions about the target for the advertisements, are shown in Table IV. The majority of children felt that the target group for these indirect cigarette advertisements were the working adult males.

**Table II**  
Children's choices for and against indirect cigarette advertisements

Number of indirect cigarette advertisements listed by children	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
1. Popular			
- Listed 1 advertisement	7 (8.1)	12 (16.4)	19 (11.9)
2. Unpopular			
- Listed 1 advertisement	16 (18.6)	16 (21.9)	32 (20.1)
- Listed 2 advertisements	1 (1.2)	4 (5.5)	5 (3.1)
3. Dislike any cigarette advertisements	2 (2.3)	13 (17.8)	15 (9.4)
4. Only non-cigarette related advertisements listed	60 (69.8)	28 (38.4)	88 (55.5)
Total	86 (100.0)	79 (55.5)	159 (100.0)

**Table III**  
**Children's understanding of indirect cigarette advertisements**

	Advertised cigarettes (%)	Advertised non-cigarette products (%)	Advertised other products (%)	Do not understand advertisement (%)	Total (%)
Male	145 (28.4)	159 (31.2)	69 (13.5)	137 (26.9)	510 (100.0)
Female	129 (29.3)	91 (20.6)	85 (19.3)	136 (30.8)	441 (100.0)
Total	274 (28.8)	250 (26.3)	154 (16.2)	273 (28.7)	951 (100.0)

**Table IV**  
**Children's perception of characteristics of target group of indirect cigarette advertisements**

		Responses	Percent
1. Target sex	1. Male	627	(68.4)
	2. Female	11	(1.2)
	3. Both	279	(30.4)
	Total	917	(100.0)
2. Target age	1. Children	1	(0.1)
	2. Adolescents	16	(1.7)
	3. Children & adolescents	2	(0.2)
	4. Adolescents & adults	31	(3.3)
	5. Adults	846	(89.0)
	6. All ages	28	(2.9)
Total	924	(100.0)	
3. Target group	1. Children	6	(0.6)
	2. Workers	948	(99.4)
	Total	954	(100.0)
4. Hobbies	1. Smoking	153	(30.5)
	2. Horse riding	134	(26.7)
	3. Travelling	116	(23.2)
	4. Sports	98	(19.6)
	Total	501	(100.0)

\* Not all students response to each section

There were numerous hobbies of the target group listed by the children. However, the common hobbies listed by the children were travelling, sports and bicycling and horseriding, all of which are in line with the association created by the advertisements with smoking. Smoking was also listed as one of the hobbies of the target group of these advertisements but the number of response was small.

### Discussion

Presently, indirect cigarette advertisements are legal in Malaysia. Critics have claimed that it promotes smoking among the children and have called for a total ban on any form of cigarette advertising. This study attempts to look at Primary 6 schoolchildren's perceptions of advertisements, in particular indirect cigarette advertisements found in magazines available in Malaysia.

Television is the most powerful source of advertisements for both boys and girls where 137 children (86.1%) are exposed to these advertisements. The television is a popular mode of home entertainment and most families in Malaysia have access to a television set. The impact of television will be much greater in the future when more television channels and 24 hour satellite TV are widely accessible. Magazines are also popular sources of advertisements for these children, even though it was rated after television, radio and newspaper. There are numerous magazines available presently, targeting for the youth market. Perhaps at 12 years of age, reading magazines is not as common as watching television, reading newspaper and listening to the radio. In an older age group, when the purchasing power and the reading ability improves, then reading magazines may increase, and advertisements in them will have more impact.

Most of the children did not list any cigarette advertisements among their most popular and most unpopular advertisements. Among the 'most popular advertisements', very few children listed indirect cigarette advertisements. There were more children who listed them under their 'most unpopular advertisement' list. There were also 15 children who did write 'cigarette advertisements', without giving any particular brand. The low level of dislike for cigarette

advertisement in this study may be that these children were unaware of the nature and purpose of the advertisement. These children may not have been exposed to cigarette smoking at this young age although they may be aware of their parents, brothers and relatives smoking cigarettes with the same brand as these advertisements. However, schoolchildren should be taught to dislike smoking, and any method used to promote smoking, including advertising. This will help reduce the prevalence of smoking among schoolchildren in the country.

Even though the advertisements were advertising products other than cigarettes, 274 of the responses (28.8%) cited that these advertisements were meant for cigarettes. This is quite high since these group of children were still in primary school and most probably have not been exposed to smoking or brands of cigarettes. In his study, Aitken noted that 22% of 6-10-years-old said that the indirect cigarette advertisements were advertising cigarettes and this proportion increased to 91% among the secondary schoolchildren<sup>7</sup>. Male children should be more aware about cigarettes brand and advertising compared to the female. However, this study found the level of awareness is slightly higher among the female children (29.3%) compared to the male children (28.4%). The expected gender difference may be obvious in a higher age-group as the level of awareness of the indirect cigarette advertisement is expected to be higher among the secondary schoolchildren. This is the period of adolescence, where masculinity, glamour, sports and fun are very important and parental control will be less. They are will be aware of cigarette brands and will be more susceptible to the indirect cigarette advertisement shown.

Most of the children felt that these advertisements were meant for adult working males. This may be due to the fact that more males were shown in these advertisement and the ruggedness of the sceneries in the advertisements shown. Only 5.2% felt that these advertisements were also meant for adolescent. Interestingly, the top five related hobbies listed were travelling, sports, smoking and horseriding. These are all activities that have been promoted to be associated with smoking in cigarette advertisements.

In the face of worldwide tobacco advertising campaigns, the decision to smoke become an easy and tempting

option. Public health authorities have comparatively few resources with which to 'deglamourise' smoking and to present information about its consequences for health. The WHO Expert Committee on Smoking Control bluntly stated that 'the international' tobacco industry's irresponsible behaviour and its massive advertising and promotional campaigns are, in the opinion of the Committee, direct causes of a substantial number of unnecessary deaths<sup>8</sup>. It is said that educating the young schoolchildren to deter them from starting smoking would still be the most feasible way to control smoking in the population<sup>9</sup>. However, studies have shown that smoking is imbued with a multitude of important cultural meanings, which beckons the young nonsmoker as distinctly positive and beguiling, and their attraction is frequently irresistible<sup>10</sup>. Thus, it is difficult to motivate the young to avoid a risk to whose effects they will only be vulnerable only many years later. A combination of various strategies is called for and banning of all forms of cigarette advertisements is an essential means to seriously control smoking among the schoolchildren. For this reason, 27 countries throughout the world have a total ban on tobacco advertising and a further 77 have some form of restrictions<sup>11</sup>.

## Conclusion

This preliminary study has attempted to describe children's perceptions of indirect cigarette advertisements found in magazines. The study was limited to Primary 6 schoolchildren and indirect cigarette advertisements found in local magazines. Given that television is the most important source of advertisements for this group and the greater impact it will have in the near future in Malaysia, its utility and effectiveness as a source of cigarette campaign should be studied in greater depth. Our study also show that age may be an important factor in the perceptions of advertisement and its impact may be greater in a higher age-group. This study needs expansion in the future to focus on these two main limitations.

## Acknowledgements

This study was supported by funds from the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment Malaysia (Grant No:06-02-05-6074) under the IRPA scheme.

## References

1. A Study Group of the Public Health Department. The smoking habits of school children Br J Prev Soc Med. 1959;13 : 14.
2. O'Connell DL, Alexander HM, Dobson AJ *et al*. Cigarette smoking and drug use in school children 111. Factors associated with smoking. Int J Epid 1981;110 : 221-31.
3. Salber EJ, Goldman E, Buka M, Welsh B. Smoking habits of high school children in Newton, Massachusetts. New Eng J Med 1961;265 : 969-74.
4. World Health Organisation. Smoking control strategies in developing countries - Report of a WHO Expert Committee WHO Technical Report Series 695, Geneva, World Health Organisation 1983.
5. Medical Tribune. Tobacco advertising questioned 11/96 1 June 1996.
6. Utusan Konsumer Tobacco Companies: Breakaway to exploit legal loopholes. Consumer Association of Penang May 1996.
7. Aitken PP, Leather DS, O'Hagan FJ. Children's perceptions of advertisements for cigarettes. Soc Sci Med 1985;21(7) : 785-97.
8. WHO Technical Report Series No 636, 1979. Controlling the smoking epidemic: Report of the WHO Expert committee on smoking control.
9. Yaacob IB, Hishamuddin MH. Smoking habits and attitudes among secondary schoolteachers. Southeast Asian J Trop Med Public Health 1994;25 : 1 : 74-79
10. Chapman S. Smokers: why do they start and continue? World Health Forum 1995;161-9.
11. Roemer R, Legislative action to combat the world smoking epidemic (2nd edition). Geneva, World Health Organisation, 1993.