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**Tobacco Advertising and
Smoking Amongst
Adolescents:
A Qualitative Study
in Malaysia**

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**Financial support from
The Rockefeller Foundation and
Thai Health Promotion Foundation**

Tobacco Advertising and Smoking Amongst Adolescents: A Qualitative Study in Malaysia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A qualitative study using focus group discussions was conducted to explore and gain a more indepth understanding of the smoking behaviour among young people in Malaysia. Specifically, the study examined youth smoking behaviour and factors that influence it, their exposure to tobacco advertising and opinion of school-based prevention programmes. A total of 96 adolescent smokers and non-smokers between the ages of 13 and 17 from Penang and Kelantan, participated in the study.

Several social, environmental and cultural factors were associated with smoking initiation. Easy accessibility to tobacco products and advertising, parental and sibling smoking, peer pressure and the perceived benefits of smoking such as beliefs about mood control and positive image of smoking contributed to youth smoking. There are some gender differences. Girls were more likely to perceive smoking as a means to cope with negative emotions.

The process of smoking initiation and becoming a regular smoker was similar between male and female students. Most smokers smoked a moderate amount of between 10 to 15 cigarettes a day. Females smoked less. The amount smoked and expenditures on cigarettes were associated with the amount of pocket money available and the socio-economic status of families. Smokers from poorer families tend to smoke significantly less than their financially better-off counterparts. Dunhill was the most preferred brand smoked for both genders. This appeared to be related to the pervasiveness of Dunhill advertising and youth's belief that it is more exclusive, and of better quality, an image intensively promoted by the tobacco company.

Cigarette advertising was prevalent on billboards in the past and currently at points of purchase, on television (through sports sponsorship) as indicated by the ability of smokers and non-smokers to recall cigarette brand names and describe various types of advertising associated with each brand. The study found smokers' to be highly exposed to tobacco advertising and that they were very receptive to it as indicated by their high recall of the types of tobacco ads and images that were promoted such as smokers are mature, stylist, attractive to the opposite sex and macho.

Findings showed that underage smoking is rather prevalent and that these youths had could purchase their own cigarettes despite a ban on purchase of tobacco to those below 18 years old indicating rather poor enforcement of this policy. It is evident that easy access to cigarettes and other tobacco products have facilitated the uptake and continuation of smoking among these young people.

Most smokers were aware of the harmfulness of smoking and had intentions to quit smoking but they were not motivated and committed enough to stop. Most perceived existing methods such as providing counseling, enforcement in school and anti-smoking messages as ineffective for young people. Current school-based smoking prevention education activities such as talks and exhibitions are not attractive to youth and thus

ineffective. These youths have instead proposed alternative activities such as motivational talks, camps, outdoor activities that would encourage young people to practice a healthy lifestyle without tobacco use.

Several factors protected non-smokers from picking up the smoking habit. Parental control and intolerance to smoking, fear of parental disapproval and disciplinary action in school were important deterrents. Most said that smoking is a waste of money, besides, it has bad health effects.

This study shows that exposure to tobacco advertising is associated with smoking initiation among youth. The government should implement tobacco control policies that are effective in reducing youth smoking such as increasing the price of cigarettes through tax increase, banning advertising at point of purchase, implement picture health warnings and improve enforcement of existing laws such as ban on sale to minors and smoke-free public places. It is also recommended that further study on the role of various risk factors that are associated with adolescent smoking and to identify gender differences be carried out.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is well established that tobacco is a leading preventable cause of death and that experimentation with cigarette smoking begins during adolescence. Available epidemiologic data indicate that most smokers take up the habit before the age of 18. In Malaysia, the sales of tobacco to minors are prohibited and direct advertising of tobacco is banned. Still the laws have not deterred the increase of adolescents who smoke.

Developing effective preventive programmes is important to reduce tobacco-related mortality and morbidity as well as to prevent progression to the usage of other drugs. There is a need for more systematic surveillance and understanding of the magnitude, characteristics, social conditions and meaning of tobacco consumption among youths.

The aim of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is to increase our understanding of smoking behaviour among young people. This approach is chosen to enable us to explore and gain better insights into the meaning of smoking in the lives of young boys and girls. The specific objectives of the FGD are to gain insights into the following:

1. Factors that influence youths to smoke
2. Meanings of smoking for boys and girls
3. Exposure and interpretation of tobacco advertising
4. Perceptions of school-based tobacco prevention programmes.

2. STUDY METHODS AND TOOLS

2.1 Recruitment of the Focus Groups

All the respondents were recruited through a few secondary schools in the state of Penang and Kelantan. In Penang, three schools (2 schools on Penang Island and 1 semi-rural school in the Northern Province Wellesley) were involved in the study. In the more rural state of Kelantan, 2 schools from the urban area of Kota Bharu and 1 semi-rural school from Bachok participated in the study.

The reason for this recruiting method was that smoking was considered to be an increasing problem within the school setting, especially for the chosen age group, with smoking still banned for below 18 year olds. While it is relatively easy to obtain the cooperation of schools, and a convenient method to recruit study respondents, recruitment through the school system meant that the study was conducted in a more restrictive environment and thus has its disadvantages. This restrictive environment provided a less comfortable atmosphere for the focus groups since smoking is an offence in schools and punishable through fines and suspension from school. In addition, not all students participated voluntarily (some students have been caught in school for smoking offences and thus were asked by school counselors to participate in the study). It was difficult for the researchers to obtain the full trust and confidence of the respondents and this was reflected in the reluctance of respondents to clarify in-depth the more sensitive issues. To overcome this, the researchers had to repeatedly reassure participants that all data collected would be kept highly confidential and that the school would not have access to the individual responses of participants or the whole group.

The ease with which recruitment was carried out varied between the various ethnic groups and gender. It was relatively easy to gain access to Malay male students compared to Chinese and Indian male students. The total number of Malay male students who were caught smoking in school was significantly higher compared to non-Malay male students. It was thus easier to recruit Malay male students than Chinese and Indian male students. Generally female smoking is comparatively low in schools, and therefore it was very difficult to recruit female students. The Malay female students that participated in the study were recruited from two urban schools in Penang. These schools did not have reports of female Chinese students who smoked. Schools in Kelantan, reported the absence of smoking among female students. The study has very low representation of female smokers of all races as well as Chinese and Indian male smokers.

Seven focus groups comprising of students who smoked were conducted in Penang, and another 5 were conducted in Kelantan, a predominantly rural state in the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia (see Appendix 1 for list of schools and types of respondents recruited from each school).

A similar number (12) of focus group discussions comprising of non-smokers were conducted in Penang (n=6) and Kelantan (n=6) (see Appendix 2 for list of schools and types of respondents recruited from each school).

2.2. Conduct of the Focus Groups

The focus groups were conducted within the schools in rooms that were assigned for this purpose. A topic guide with guidelines for the moderator was used in the focus group. All focus groups were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia and moderated by the researchers with the aid of trained research assistants, recorded with a tape recorder and notes were taken concurrently. The duration of the focus group discussions varied between 60-90 minutes.

These focus group discussions explored students' smoking behaviour, views on cigarette promotion and advertisement, influence of cigarette advertisement on smoking behaviour, awareness of the sponsorship of events by tobacco companies, choice of brands, views on anti-smoking and prevention activities in schools and quit-smoking experiences.

2.3. Description of the Sampling Units

A total of 96 students who smoked (16 females, 16 Chinese and 80 Malays), between the ages of 13 and 17 years old, participated in the study. Most of them were daily smokers at the time of the study. A few respondents smoked a few times a week.

Another 97 non-smokers within a similar age category also participated in the 12 focus group discussions conducted among non-smoking students. Most were Malays and males.

2.4. Transcriptions

All focus group discussions were recorded on a tape-recorder. The tapes were transcribed by the research assistants following the topics of discussion and reviewed by the researchers.

2.5. Data Coding and Analysis

The data were coded and analyzed manually.

3. FINDINGS ON SMOKERS

3.1 Smoking Behaviour

3.1.1. Influence to Smoke

Peer influence was the most common reason mentioned for smoking initiation. This was reported by the male students from both urban and semi-rural areas in the 2 states. It took in various forms. The students described their experiences:

“Saya mula hisap sebab kawan-kawan saya merokok, saya nak ikut kawan-kawan” (I started to smoke because my friends smoke, I want to follow my friends)

“Kawan saya ajak saya merokok” (My friends invited me to smoke)

“Kawan saya bagi saya rokok” (My friends offered me cigarettes)

Some were exposed to adults who smoked such as parents (usually father), school teachers or other family members (brothers or grandparents) and thus were motivated to try. Several of the participants described his personal experience:

“Bila tengok ayah hisap rokok, saya terasa macam nak cuba juga. Jadi saya beli sendiri rokok dan mula hisap” (When I observe my father smoking I too feel like trying. So I bought myself cigarette and started to smoke)

“Dah lama saya tengok ayah hisap rokok. Terasa macam nak hisap juga” (I have watched my father smoke for a long time. I too feel like smoking too)

“Saya mula hisap rokok daun masa darjah tiga. Tok saya yang hisap rokok daun itu” (I started to smoke tobacco leaves while I was in Primary 3. My grandfather smokes tobacco leaves)

“Abang saya ajar macammana hendak hisap, saya tengok abang saya hisap dan nampak menarik” (My older brother taught me how to smoke, I watch my brother smoke and I am attracted to it)

“Tengok cikgu hisap rokok masa sekolah rendah” (I watched my teacher smoke while I was in primary school)

“Orang dewasa boleh hisap, kami pun boleh” (Adults are allowed to smoke, so should we)

Some students were attracted to smoking because it made them feel more mature, free and more like adults. Participants of the focus groups expressed their perceived social value of smoking as:

“Rasa seronok nampak dewasa” (Feels good and like an adult)

“Rasa bebas, apa orang boleh buat kami boleh buat” (Feel free, what others do I can also do)

“Gaya mutu keunggulan” (This is a tag line used by a well know cigarette brand – Dunhill, meaning “style, quality, excellence”)

“Merokok akan menjadikan seseorang nampak lebih matang” (Smoking will make one look more mature)

Female students were more likely to report family problems (parental arguments, lack of communication at home) and influence of friends, particularly boys, as reasons for initiating smoking. These students claimed that smoking relieves the tension and pressure from home and it helped them to relax. One of the female smokers mentioned that:

“Merokok memberi tenang pada diri saya terutamanya dari memikirkan masalah” (Smoking makes me feel calm, and avoid thinking about problems).

Female students also tended to smoke in a group. Some students said that they felt more “mature” and “superior” when they smoked.

3.1.2. Age of Experimentation

Most of the Malay male students in both urban and semi-rural areas had their first puff when they were in elementary school (primary 4 to 6, i.e., between 10 and 12 years old). It did not take them too long (several weeks to a few months) before they were smoking regularly (most on a daily basis). Chinese male students from the study reported initiating smoking later, mostly in junior high school (Forms 1 and 2, i.e., 13 and 14 years of age). Female students also started smoking later, usually in lower secondary school.

3.1.3. Choice of Cigarette Brands

Dunhill was the brand of choice for most of the Malay smokers. Pall Mall, Marlboro, Salem, Perilly’s, Crystal, Gudang Garam, Sampoerna, Peter Styverson, Benson & Hedges, Winston and Camel were mentioned sporadically.

Most semi-rural students in Kelantan started smoking rolled tobacco leaves and eventually moved on to smoking Dunhill and other commercial brands.

Most male students would switch to cheaper brands sometimes when they did not have enough pocket money.

Most smokers of Dunhill liked its taste (stronger) and the classy and stylish image associated with smoking this brand. Several of the respondents described their preferences:

“Kami lebih suka Dunhill, rasa ia lagi sedap” (We prefer Dunhill, it taste better)

“Dunhill ada gaya dan kelas” (Dunhill has style and class)

“Dunhill lebih sedap - manis di dalam mulut- rasa nikmat” (Dunhill taste better - leaves a sweetness in the mouth - feels satisfied)

“Jika hisap rokok lain akan batuk. Masih belum jumpa rokok lain yang lebih sedap daripada Dunhill” (If smoke other brands, I would cough. There are no other brands that taste better than Dunhill)

Most respondents perceived that cigarettes that are much more expensive such as Dunhill and Salem offer a more exclusive style. Chinese male smokers also favored Dunhill because it is stronger and taste better.

Most of the female smokers smoked various brands because it is a common practice to share cigarettes when they smoke in a group. Some have beliefs regarding certain brands. For example, Salem is considered for beginners, because it is cool, soft and smooth. Winston is regarded as a cheaper brand and smoked if one does not have enough money.

3.1.4. Reasons for Switching Brands

It is common that smokers switch brands to reduce financial expenses or due to other perceived notions pertaining to certain brands. Some feedback provided by respondents include:

“Kalau masa ada duit, kami beli Dunhill. Kalau duit tak cukup, kami beli rokok murah sikit macam, Winston, Crystal dan Perrily’s”. (When we have the money, we buy Dunhill. If we don’t have enough money, we buy cheaper brands, such as Winston, Crystal and Perrily’s)

“Pall Mall murah, kalau kami tak ada duit kami beli Pall Mall” (Pall Mall is cheap, if we do not have the money we smoke Pall Mall)

Some of the respondents switched brands when they were ill.

“Salem kami hisap kalau batuk atau demam, sebab sejuk, kalau rokok keras nanti badan rasa panas” (We smoke Salem when we have a cough or fever, because its cool, if the cigarette is strong, our bodies feel hot)

The student smokers indicated to have other perceptions about various brands of cigarettes:

“Marlboro light pun sedap juga” (Malboro light taste good too)

“Benson & Hedges untuk orang tua-tua sahaja” (Benson & Hedges are only for the older people)

“A person who smokes Gudang Garam is usually a heavy smoker. So they do not stick to this brand because it causes them to get dizzy after smoking it”

“Camel is too expensive and doesn’t want to risk smoking a non-filtered cigarette”

3.1.5. Amount Smoked and Expenses on Cigarettes

Most of the respondents were daily smokers during the time of the study. The amount of cigarette smoked daily was highly varied. Most of the Malay male respondents from Penang, spent between RM2 to RM4 per day. This averaged to about 5 to 10 cigarettes per day. Only a small minority smoked more than 15 cigarettes daily.

The older students (16-17 years olds) reported smoking significantly more cigarettes per day compared to those in lower secondary (13-14 years old). Most of the older students smoked between 10 and 15 sticks a day. The younger students smoked between 5 to 10 sticks daily. Semi-rural students of both age groups from Kelantan, tended to smoke even less on average, i.e., between 2 to 4 cigarettes each day. This was because of financial constraints. These students were mostly the children of poor tobacco growing farmers in Kelantan, the main tobacco producing state in Peninsular Malaysia.

Chinese male students have reported smoking much less compared to the Malay male students. Most smoked between 5 to 10 cigarettes daily.

Female students smoked much less compared to the male students of both ethnic groups, i.e., less than 5 sticks per day.

Students who have limited pocket money could only afford to buy one or two sticks of cigarettes a day to fulfill their urge to smoke. Financial constraint has prevented these

students from becoming heavy smokers. This was very evident among the poor rural students in Kelantan. However, students from the semi-rural area in Penang, could afford spending much more on cigarettes each day because most were employed part-time and had more pocket money daily.

3.1.6. Access to Cigarettes

Although sale of cigarettes are not allowed to those below 18 years of age, all respondents in this study said that it was easy to gain access to cigarettes. These students could buy cigarettes (even while still wearing school uniform) from most sales outlets, such as grocery stalls, supermarkets, food stalls, coffee shops, snooker centers, etc. Cigarettes are sold in individual sticks in most places and this facilitates students' access to them.

3.1.7. Common Smoking Places

All the respondents smoked outside school and some within the school compound too. Most Malay male students have been caught smoking in school toilets. Most Chinese male students on the contrary said they have abstained from smoking in school to avoid disciplinary action taken against them when caught smoking. Smoking outside school and homes often occurred in shopping complexes, coffee shops, food stalls, snooker centers, video arcades and other places where young people usually hang-out.

Most of the students hid their smoking habit from their parents. However, there were some parents who tolerated smoking among their children.

3.2. Receptivity to Tobacco Advertising

3.2.1 Ability to Recall Tobacco Advertisements

All focus group participants from Penang (semi-rural and urban) and the urban area in Kelantan could recall some tobacco advertisements although not uniformly. They included the more common advertisements such as that of Dunhill, Salem, Winston, Sampoerna, Mild Seven, Marlboro and Benson and Hedges. Respondents associated Dunhill with Football, Marlboro with Formula 1, Lucky Strike with motorbike racing, Winston with eagles, Perilly's with the color black and Salem with snowy mountains. However, the two focus groups from the semi-rural area in Kelantan could not recall as many advertisements as the other groups. This could be attributed to the limited exposure to tobacco ads among the latter groups.

When asked to describe the images projected by the various tobacco advertisements, most of the focus groups could recall the slogans of the most commonly advertised brands such as "*Dunhill mutu keunggulan (Dunhill quality, excellence)*" and "Salem cool planet". Most of the groups could recall the Dunhill advertisement mainly because of its intensive football sponsorship, especially during the previous World Cup event.

Most respondents reported watching these advertisements in the mass media, such as the television, especially on posters at point of purchase, on buses (in the case of Sampoerna), and on billboards.

3.2.2. Perception of Tobacco Advertisements' Influence in Smoking Initiation

Respondents were also asked whether they perceived tobacco advertisements as a positive influence on young people to start smoking. Half of the participants perceived that advertisements motivate young people to initiate smoking by portraying smokers as macho, stylish and relaxed people. These respondents perceived that non-smokers are attracted to these messages and are influenced to try smoking. The other half of the respondents felt that tobacco advertisements have no influence on young people to initiate smoking. They arrived at this conclusion based on their own experience. They believed that peer influence was a stronger factor.

3.2.3. Exposure to Indirect Advertising

The focus group discussions assessed involvement in cigarette promotional activities by asking respondents whether they are aware of and owned a piece of clothing, a hat or bag, or some other item with a cigarette brand logo on it. All respondents could identify products that carry a cigarette brand logo with ease. They provided a wide range of these promotional items such as sports wear, bags, caps, wallets, pens, watches, cigarette lighters, etc. However, most of the respondents did not have ownership of any of these items and stated that they would not spend money to purchase them. A small minority has obtained some of these promotional items free.

3.3. Quit Smoking Experiences

3.3.1. Attempts to Quit

Most of the respondents from all focus groups have tried to quit smoking at least once. However, they were unsuccessful. Most of these respondents had managed to abstain for several days to a few weeks. The longest attempt by 2 participants was for a duration of two months. Addiction to cigarettes was the main reason given for failure to quit smoking. These respondents said that they could not forget cigarettes, and having friends who smoke have always drawn them back to the habit. As stated by one respondent, "the temptation is always high, seeing friends who smoke". Although most have experienced disciplinary action when they were caught smoking in school, this did not deter them from smoking.

Among those respondents who did not attempt to quit or have no intention to do so, most mentioned that they would feel very tired and lacked energy if they stop smoking.

3.3.2. Reasons for Trying to Quit

Most of the participants mentioned that they tried to quit the habit when they experienced a bad cough or were sick. “Smoking is a waste of money” was mentioned by some of the participants. Other reasons reported were “smoking ruins the body”, “competing in sports”, “lost of appetite”, “encouragement from girlfriends” and “parents’ objection”. A few of the girls attempted to quit when their boyfriends objected to their smoking.

3.3.3. Perception Regarding Easiness to Quit

Most respondents from the various focus groups were of the opinion that to quit smoking is not an easy task. They felt that it is impossible to quit abruptly, and that stopping the habit has to be carried out progressively. Most mentioned that they feel great physical discomfort, restlessness, tiredness, sleepiness and weakness when they tried to quit smoking. These are withdrawal symptoms that they found much difficulty in overcoming.

3.3.4. Perceptions Regarding Approaches to Quit Smoking

Responses provided were varied. Generally, most respondents agreed that counseling (from school counselor or medical doctor), enforcement (in school or elsewhere) or posters that warn against ill effects of smoking are not effective methods to help smokers quit the habit. Some of the respondents felt that it may be worthwhile exploring with other methods such as “quitting in a group where its members can help and encourage each other”, ‘avoid smoker friends”, “engage in healthy alternative activities such as sports”, or “banning cigarettes”. There were a few respondents who believed that to successfully quit smoking depended very much on “one’s own determination and motivation to quit”. Most felt that providing “medication” if available, may help them to quit smoking.

3.4. Feedback on Preventive Programmes in Schools

All focus groups have reported some form of educational activities that were carried out in their schools to discourage smoking. They included anti-smoking and anti-drug talks and exhibitions, counseling and disciplinary action. However, most students found these programmes boring and not effective in preventing students from engaging in unhealthy activities such as smoking. Most of the students suggested alternative activities such as motivational talks, camps, outdoor activities and sports activities.

3.5. Exposure to Anti-tobacco Educational Materials

All respondents from the focus groups have been exposed to various kinds of educational materials such as posters (in school, health clinics, in public places), health talks and exhibitions and information on the adverse health effects of smoking. They could recall the warning message on cigarette boxes: “smoking is dangerous to your health”. Although the awareness of the ill effects of smoking was high among the respondents,

none were motivated enough to stop smoking. The reasons for unsuccessful attempts to quit smoking were described above.

4. FINDINGS ON NON-SMOKERS

4.1 Opinions on Reasons for Youths to Smoke

Peer influence was the most common reason cited for youth initiation to smoking. They said that it is difficult for someone to be part of the gang and not to behave as the others do. Some say that non-smokers were "challenged" by others in the group to smoke ("kawan mencabar mereka"). It was hard to be a non-smoker when others around smoked.

Boys also mentioned that smoking makes them look tough, like a rebel. This reason came out quite often among the rural boys of Kelantan.

"Dia nak tujuk debe (samseng)" (He wants to show as if he is a gangster)
"Kawan lain nak menunjuk-tunjuk pada kawan lain" (They just want to show off to the other friends)

Others expressed similar idea in terms of "freedom", to be able to do what they want such as smoking and motorbike racing, looks "aggressive", looks "macho".

"Kalau lelaki tidak menghisap rokok, nampak lembap" (If a boy does not smoke, he looks sissy).

"Lelaki nampak samseng dan agresif" (Boys look rebellious and aggressive).

"Sepupu saya cuba nak buktikan dia telah sejati dengan merokok sebab ada orang kata dia pondan" (My nephew smokes to prove he is not a gay).

Hence, smoking is a means to establish a particular self-image, the male, macho, rebellious and aggressive image.

They also mentioned that some girls are influenced by their male friends to smoke. They smoke to show that girls can do whatever boys do and to get accepted. One of the girls said that she smoke when she is with the group that smokes but she would refrain from smoking when she is with her boyfriend who does not like girls who smoke.

Girls also smoke to attract attention. When they are in shopping complexes, even a cigarette in the hand, makes them stand out in a crowd. One of the participants in relating about her friend's experience, said that she would hold a cigarette to attract attention:

"Saya hisap rokok, perempuan lain tak hisap. Jadi saya berbeza dari mereka" (I smoke, but the other girls do not smoke. Hence I look different from them)

As such girls use smoking to attract the attention of the other sex.

Girls also mentioned that some of their friends smoke to get rid of tensions at home and with their boyfriends. They see their parents, mostly fathers, smoke to release tension so they feel that smoking can do the same for them.

4.2. Perceptions on the Influence of Advertising on Smoking

Participants were asked to recall cigarette advertisements. The most easily recalled advertisement is that of Dunhill which they associate its sponsorship of various football events including the last World Cup. Even though sponsorship has substantially decreased, Dunhill advertisement remains salient in their mind. This is also reinforced by the posters that are prevalent in coffee shops, sundry shops, restaurants, bus stations and along the roads. The other advertisements recalled were Marlboro, Salem and Sampoerna. They associated Marlboro with motorcycle racing and Formula 1, Salem with snowy mountains and Sampoerna with a local game *Sepak Takraw*.

Many of them could also easily recall the taglines of “*Dunhill mutu keunggulan*” as well as “*Salem cool planet*”. In addition, they have seen products with cigarette logos such as Dunhill cap, watch, pen and lighter, Marlboro and Camel jackets and Salem bag. Some said they have seen some of the imitation items sold in night markets.

When asked if they would purchase these items, most would not, but if they need not pay for them, most said they have no reservation using these items. They felt that owning and wearing these items would not necessarily influence them to smoke.

“Bagi saya produk tersebut adalah normal. Saya tidak mempunyai apa-apa perasaan kalau memakai produk tersebut sekalipun” (For me, these products are like any normal products. I will not have any feelings about using them)

A respondent from semi-rural school, said he feels proud (*bangga*) wearing the Dunhill products as these are very expensive items.

It seems that the publicity of the tobacco-sponsored concerts are well done. Many non-smokers could recall the Sampoerna’s sponsored-concert of a popular local band ‘XPDC’ and Salem’s sponsorship of Ziana Zain concert, another popular local singer.

4.3. Perceptions on Whether Advertising Influences Youths to Smoke

Most of the students disagreed that advertising influences youths to smoke.

4.4 Feedback on Anti-tobacco School Programmes

Most of the students are well aware of the disciplinary actions on students caught smoking or in possession of cigarettes when in school premises. They also reported of regular spot checks for cigarette in schools.

Students in two schools in Penang reported having heard of the “Clean Breathe Club” (*Kelab Nafas Baru*) which runs activities on smoking prevention. In one of the schools, they reported that the club was not effective as most student smokers were not willing to join. In the other school, however, the respondents reported that the Club was only for smokers which, they felt, gave a negative perception of these students to all teachers and students.

Students also voiced their dissatisfaction that disciplinary actions were taken only on students whereas some teachers smoke in school premises as well.

In Kelantan, all the respondents said that they could not recall any anti-tobacco activity held in their schools. Their schools had anti-drugs programmes that included some information on tobacco. One school reported a recent talk on anti-tobacco by a lecturer-doctor from the university. Hence, they suggested more focus on tobacco prevention activities. Generally all respondents said that the activities would also have to be more interesting than the usual talks and exhibitions. One group suggested giving incentives to smokers who quit for at least a year.

4.5. Reasons Why They Did Not Smoke

Most of the respondents have family members who smoke, either their father or brother. Several reasons were cited for not smoking. First is parental control. Many said that their parents prohibit them from smoking, including those whose fathers are smokers.

“Ayah saya merokok, tapi tak benarkan saya merokok” (my father smokes but does not allow me to smoke)

Second, they felt that it is a waste of money. They do not have extra money to spend on cigarettes.

“Hisap rokok akan merugikan wang” (Smoking is a waste of money)

“Tiada wang. Rokok asyik naik harga” (No money. Price of cigarette keep increasing)

Third is for health reason. They are aware of the health consequences of smoking. Fourth, is that smoking smells bad.

“Benci bau rokok, rasa rejik” (Hates the smell of cigarette, feels like throwing up)

The focus group also discussed the students’ daily activities. Most of the respondents do not frequently hang out with friends, either because they have work to do or due to restrictions from parents.

5. DISCUSSION

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore various issues related to adolescent smoking. The study has increased our understanding of the factors that are likely to influence smoking experimentation and initiation among schooling adolescents, their pattern of smoking and the meaning of smoking for male and female students as well as their attempts to quit smoking. The study also examined the exposure and receptivity of smokers and non-smokers to tobacco advertising and their perceptions regarding school tobacco prevention programmes.

Discussions on the reasons for smoking initiation revealed that several factors in the broader social and physical environment (that is, accessibility of tobacco products and advertising) and in the immediate environment (parental smoking, sibling smoking, peer smoking, peer pressure or combinations of these factors) as well as perceived benefits of smoking (beliefs about mood control and positive image of smoking) contributed to the smoking initiation process of the adolescent smokers who participated in the focus groups. Among male smokers, peer influence and approval, parental and sibling smoking, as well as the availability of cigarettes were identified as important risk factors. Girls were more likely to perceive smoking as a means to cope with negative emotions compared with the boys. Most respondents (both boys and girls) felt that smoking among girls is not tolerated and this social norm probably explains the low reported prevalence of smoking among female students in all the schools that were involved in the study.

Descriptions of the process of becoming a smoker and the stages one goes through from starting to smoke to becoming a regular smoker is similar for most of the male and female smokers. Most of the male smokers in this study have started to smoke while in elementary school (11 to 12 years old) and have progressed to daily and moderately heavy smokers (between 10 to 15 cigarettes a day) by the time they reached upper secondary school (16 –17 years of age). The amount of cigarettes smoked daily and total expenditures on cigarettes were found to be associated with the amount of pocket money available. Students who were employed part-time smoked much more daily compared to those with limited financial resources. It was also evident that students from the semi-rural area in Kelantan, who were from poorer families tended to smoke significantly less compared to their financially better-off counterparts from Penang and the urban area of Kelantan.

Dunhill was most widely smoked among both male and female smokers and the most preferred cigarette brand. It appeared to be related to the pervasiveness of Dunhill advertisements and the perception by most respondents that Dunhill is more exclusive, and of better quality, an image intensively promoted by the tobacco company. Brand switching was not common.

Cigarette advertising has been so pervasive on billboards, at point of purchases, on television (through sports sponsorship) that most respondents (both smokers and non-smokers) could name a brand whose ads captured their attention. The study tried to

assess the receptivity of smokers to tobacco advertising by asking them to recall the types of tobacco ads, the images that were promoted, and whether they own promotional item(s) with a cigarette brand logo on it. Exposure to tobacco advertisements was high among both smokers and non-smokers. This was indicated by the high recall of tobacco ads and brand slogans by students from both groups. Although direct cigarette advertisements is banned in the mass media, point of purchase advertising and promotions have increased tremendously so that tobacco advertising is still highly prevalent and visible to teenagers. Although most of the smokers did not have ownership of promotional items with a brand logo, awareness and identification of such items were high. Brand stretching is a very common feature of tobacco advertising in Malaysia. Even non-smokers would accept and tolerated the use of such promotional items.

Although most students did not state or perceive tobacco ads to have directly influenced their smoking initiation, it was evident that the messages conveyed by the advertising images have appealed to them, i.e., that smokers are mature, stylish, attractive to the opposite sex and macho. This suggests that cigarette advertising has most likely increased the perceived social value of smoking among young people and may have influenced the rate of smoking among adolescents.

Tobacco advertising has been unavoidable in the environment of adolescents and most teenagers do not become smokers. However, it is proposed that tobacco advertisements are particularly attractive to adolescents who are looking for an identity that the images are carefully designed to offer.

Youths usually obtained their first cigarettes from friends or siblings, although there were also reports of stealing their first cigarettes from parents. Sharing cigarettes among friends was common initially, particularly among the girls. With increasing levels of cigarette consumption and the setting in of dependence, most of the youths began to purchase their own tobacco. This happened soon after starting to smoke. The ban on sale of tobacco to those below 18 years old did not prevent these teenagers from purchasing cigarettes. All the adolescent smokers in the study could buy cigarettes from a variety of sources and it is evident that there is an absence of enforcement. Easy access to cigarettes and other tobacco products have facilitated the uptake and continuation of smoking among these young people.

Nicotine addiction and lack of appropriate quit-smoking services and facilities for adolescents were the main reasons reported for failure to stop smoking among most of the students who have attempted to quit the habit. Most of the smokers admitted to the wasteful and harmful effects of smoking but were not motivated and committed enough to stop. Although most of the smokers have expressed their intention to quit smoking, they perceived (and speaking from their own experience) existing methods such as counseling, enforcement in school and anti-smoking messages and education to be ineffective for young people. There is a need to develop more innovative programmes that are appropriate for youths.

Generally both smoker and non-smokers found the current school-based prevention education activities such as talks and exhibitions not interesting and ineffective. These activities do not engage the students and they have little impact on them. These students have instead proposed alternative activities, such as motivational talks, camps, outdoor activities and other interesting activities that would encourage young people to practice a healthy lifestyle without tobacco use.

Several factors protected the non-smokers from picking up the smoking habit. Parental control and intolerance to smoking was important in deterring most of these students from experimenting. Some of these students confessed to trying smoking once or twice but did not progress further because of fear of parental disapproval and disciplinary action in school. Most students also perceived smoking as a waste of money and that cigarettes are costly. The bad health effects of smoking were also cited for rejecting cigarettes. Some reported their aversion to the smell of tobacco smoke.

The study found some gender differences in smoking behaviour between male and female smokers. Female smokers were more likely to experiment and initiate tobacco use at an older age and to consume less of the product compared to the male smokers. The meaning of tobacco use in the lives of young boys and girls also differed. Among the girls, smoking was mostly perceived as a means to cope with stress, relieve anxiety and to relax. Nicotine addiction and prevention of withdrawal symptoms were the primary reasons for continuing smoking among most of the male smokers.

There are some differences in smoking behaviour between urban and semi-rural areas. Male smokers from the rural areas tended to smoke less commercially sold tobacco compared to their urban counterparts because of financial constraints to support their habit. Furthermore, the former group has less exposure to tobacco ads. The study also found a difference between the Malay and Chinese male smokers. The Chinese male smokers in the study reported experimenting with tobacco at an older age compared to their Malay counterparts.

6. CONCLUSION

This small-scale qualitative study has provided us with a better understanding of smoking among adolescents in Malaysia and the role of tobacco advertising and promotion in smoking initiation. The study has elicited descriptive accounts of the progression of smoking among the adolescents studied and explored important factors that are likely to influence their smoking behaviour. A larger study would be useful to further examine the role of various risk factors that are associated with adolescent smoking. The study showed that exposure and receptivity to tobacco ads are high among adolescents. How does exposure to tobacco advertising impact smoking initiation among adolescents needs further investigation. More careful examination of the differential effect of advertising on more and less vulnerable youths would be very useful in helping us gain a better understanding of its effect.

Appendix 1

Table 1: Distribution of the sample units (Smokers)

	Location		Level	School	No. of participants
Boys	Kelantan (Urban)	1.	Form 2	SMK Pengkalan Chepa 1, Kelantan	9 Malays
		2.	Form 4	SMK Kubang Kerian 2, Kelantan	8 Malays
	Kelantan (Semi-rural)	3.	Form 2	SMK Badak, Bachok, Kelantan	5 Malays
		4.	Form 4	SMK Badak, Bachok, Kelantan	8 Malays
		5.	Form 2	SMK Kedai Buloh., Kelantan	8 Malays
	Penang (Urban)	6.	Form 4 and 5	SMK Tanjung Bunga, Penang	10 Malays
	Penang (Semi-rural)	7.	Form 4 and 5	SMK Permatang Tok Jaya, Butterworth	10 Malays
		8.	Form 1 –3	SMK Permatang Tok Jaya, Butterworth	6 Malays
		9.	Form 2 and 3	SMK Bagan Jaya, Butterworth	8 Chinese
		10.	Form 4 and 5	SMK Bagan Jaya, Butterworth	8 Chinese
Girls	Penang (Urban)	11.	Form 4 and 5	SMK Tanjung Bunga, Penang	10 Malays
		12.	Form 4 and 5	SMK Jelutong, Penang	6 Malays

Appendix 2

Table 2: Distribution of the sample units (Non-Smokers)

	Location		Level	School	No. of participants
Boys	Kelantan (Urban)	1.	Form 2	SMK Pengkalan Chepa	8 Malays
		2.	Form 4	SMK Kubang Kerian 2	8 Malays
	Kelantan (Semi-rural)	3.	Form 2	SMK Kedai Buloh,. Kelantan	8 Malays
		4.	Form 4	SMK Badak, Bachok,	8 Malays
	Penang (Urban)	5.	Form 4 and 5	SMK Jelutong, Penang	2 Chinese, 1 Indian, 4 Malays
		6.	Form 1 – 3	SMK Tanjung Bunga	9 Malays
	Penang (Semi-rural)	7.	Form 1 –3	SMK Permatang Tok Jaya, Butterworth	10 Malays
Girls	Kelantan (Urban)	8.	Form 4	SMK Kubang Kerian 2	7 Malays
	Kelantan (Semi-rural)	9.	Form 2	SMK Badak, Bachok,	8 Malays
	Penang (Urban)	10.	Form 4 and 5	SMK Tanjung Bunga, Penang	8 Malays
		11.	Form 4 and 5	SMK Jelutong, Penang	7 Malays
	Penang (Semi-rural)	12.	Form 4 and 5	SMK Permatang Tok Jaya, Butterworth	10 Malays



About SEATCA

The Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance (SEATCA) works closely with key partners in ASEAN member countries to generate local evidence through research programs, to enhance local capacity through advocacy fellowship program, and to be catalyst in policy development through regional forums and in-country networking. By adopting a regional policy advocacy mission, it has supported member countries to ratify and implement the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)

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