



THIRD EDITION

SMOKE-FREE

MOVIES:

FROM EVIDENCE TO ACTION



World Health
Organization

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Introduction

Imagery in motion pictures (“films”, “movies”) continues to give misleadingly positive impressions of tobacco use. Such images have been identified as a cause of smoking initiation among adolescents. In 2008, the National Cancer Institute of the United States of America (the USA) concluded that:

the total weight of evidence from cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental studies, combined with the high theoretical plausibility from the perspective of social influences, indicates a causal relationship between exposure to movie smoking depictions and youth smoking initiation (1).

In 2012, the US Surgeon General reviewed the empirical evidence on smoking by adolescents and young adults put forward by the National Cancer Institute report and came to a similar conclusion:

The evidence is sufficient to conclude that there is a causal relationship between depictions of smoking in the movies and the initiation of smoking among young people (2).

Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) are required to implement a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship, according to Article 13 of the treaty (3). The guidelines for implementation of this Article include a statement that the depiction of tobacco use in films is a form of promotion that influences tobacco use, particularly by young people (4), and include specific measures, which are addressed more fully in this report. In some countries, many youth-rated films that contain tobacco imagery are recipients of significant government production subsidies. These subsidies indirectly promote tobacco use through the media and therefore counter WHO FCTC Article 13 and its guidelines. The issue of subsidies is also discussed in greater depth.

In the past, films have been an important vehicle for placing cigarettes and other tobacco products¹ (5, 6) as a form of advertising as well as a source of social learning² (7) about smoking. The marketing of tobacco in films, particularly those originating in countries with the most active film industries, remains very common and continues to promote smoking; the films include those rated as suitable for children and adolescents.

Voluntary agreements with the tobacco industry to limit smoking in films have not and cannot work, because the fiduciary interests of the tobacco industry are opposite to those of the public health community. Although the major USA cigarette companies agreed voluntarily to limit payments for smoking in films in the early 1990s, that had no impact on the prevalence of tobacco brand placement or smoking in films during that decade. The 1998 Master Settlement Agreement in the USA between states’ attorneys general and the major domestic tobacco manufacturers included a provision in which the manufacturers agreed to a prohibition on paid tobacco product placement in films (8), a provision that was subsequently enforced by the attorneys general (see (1), Appendix 10C, page 422 for an example).

1 As cigarettes have been by far the most common tobacco product depicted in films, this report concentrates on smoking in this medium. The major cigarette companies have recently acquired smokeless tobacco firms and often promote these products with the same brand names as their major cigarette brands. In addition, e-cigarettes have been promoted through motion picture tie-ins. Policy-makers should integrate these changes in the tobacco marketplace when preparing and implementing policies on tobacco product promotion in films and other media.

2 Bandura’s social learning theory (7) emphasizes the importance of observing and modelling the behaviour, attitudes and emotional reactions of others, especially role models with high status. The names of film stars are internationally recognized; they set fashion trends and promote items like cars, watches and perfume. Young people look up to them and emulate their actions on and off screen.

After implementation of the Master Settlement Agreement, placement of brands in films decreased, and there was also a large short-term decrease in film smoking, suggesting that a large share of brand appearances and about one third of the film smoking seen before 1999 were paid for, despite assurances of self-regulation (9). Subsequent trends, however, show that agreements like the Master Settlement Agreement are not adequate alone to fully control film smoking; smoking incidents increased in films released subsequent to implementation of the Agreement in 1998, peaked in 2005, then fell to a minimum in 2010 before rebounding in 2011; the number of incidents remained above 2010 levels in 2014 (10, 11).

Logic and scientific evidence show that enforceable policies can substantially reduce smoking imagery in all film media. Measures to limit film smoking, including those outlined in the Article 13 guidelines, and to end public subsidies for the production of films with smoking can ensure that motion pictures will no longer promote smoking among young people. Strong, enforceable policy measures should be supported by programmes to educate the public, policy-makers and the entertainment industry on the value of reducing the exposure of young people to tobacco imagery.

This document summarizes current knowledge about smoking in films as well as current and proposed approaches to reduce the impact of such imagery. The aim of the report is to help countries understand the basis for taking action to limit the depiction of smoking in films. This can help the Parties to the WHO FCTC in implementing specific recommendations on smoking in films in the Article 13 guidelines. The report is expected also to be useful in those countries that are not yet parties to the treaty by helping them to implement this important component of a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship.

1. Tobacco on screen: why this is a problem?

In the past, the tobacco industry spent millions in today's US dollars to develop and maintain the portrayal of smoking in films (12). Tobacco companies have paid film producers to feature specific tobacco brands and funded advertising campaigns for film studios' latest films and their top stars. The role of films as vehicles for promoting smoking has become even more important as other forms of tobacco promotion are constrained. As shown in Figure 1, this investment³ is part of a wider, more complex marketing strategy to support pro-tobacco social norms, including product placement in mass media and sponsorship. Cinema is a core element in mass media approaches to normalizing smoking. It is important, because smoking in films is not perceived as advertising and therefore does not draw the scepticism that advertising engenders.

The British Medical Association (9), the US National Cancer Institute (1), the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (7) and other sources cite several reasons why smoking in films should be addressed as a public health problem: films reach every corner of the globe, films effectively promote smoking, and films have escaped public health scrutiny until now. Increasingly however, public health researchers and institutions are paying close attention to this important exposure. For example, in 2012 the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention began reporting smoking in box office hits in the USA as a health indicator (14) on its website (15), and projects have been launched to monitor smoking in nationally produced films in China, Europe, India and Latin America. Furthermore, the WHO FCTC, which has been ratified by 180 countries, clearly includes smoking in films as indirect tobacco marketing that requires policy action.

Figure 1: Nested relations among advertising, marketing communications, consumer marketing and stakeholder marketing in tobacco promotion



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