

INDIRECT PROMOTION OF TOBACCO THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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1. Introduction

Countries have taken various steps in line with the World Health Organization's (WHO's) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) to control tobacco production and consumption. However, the global tobacco industry has been adept at finding tactics for promoting tobacco and circumventing and subverting restrictions placed by countries regarding promoting tobacco smoking, especially in advertising (World Health Organization, 2013). Tobacco advertising functions in both direct and indirect ways. Some of the direct methods are print media, electronic media, cinema advertising, billboards, e-mail marketing, internet and social media. As most countries have restricted direct advertising, tobacco companies have moved on to promote indirect advertising, such as product packaging promotion,

promoting products through television (TV), the internet and social media (World Health Organization, 2013).

Research shows several ways in which tobacco advertising provokes children and young adults to initiate regular use, reduce the willingness of current smokers to quit, increase their daily consumption and draw former smokers back into consumption (Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, n.d.). Article 13 of the FCTC has recognised the importance of a comprehensive ban on advertising, promotion and sponsorship to reduce the consumption of tobacco products. It states that "*Member countries restrict tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorships on radio, television, print media and, as appropriate, other media, such as the internet*".

The National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol (NATA) was established in 2006 to enact strong legal aspects to reduce tobacco demand and supply measures in Sri Lanka. "The Tobacco and Alcohol Act" passed by the NATA in 2006 is the law governing tobacco control measures in Sri Lanka and this Act is in line with the WHO's FCTC. The NATA Act states that all forms of tobacco advertising and promotion, including smoking, trademarking, brand name, print, broadcast, and social media, are also banned in Sri Lanka.

Even though the law is specified clearly, several tobacco advertisements can be observed in Sri Lanka, especially using social media (ADIC, 2022). Further, the extent to which the Sri Lankan tobacco industry promotes cigarettes on social media is not entirely clear and is difficult to ascertain. The sole manufacturer of cigarettes in Sri Lanka, the Ceylon Tobacco Company (CTC), discloses its promotional activities in the CTC annual report. However, specific details/ composition of expenditure is not reported.

All forms of tobacco advertising are banned in Sri Lanka – however, it is advertised unmonitored on various platforms



Source: WHO, (2013)

Further, a significant proportion of the Sri Lankan population has access to the internet. Mobile phone subscriptions in the country have grown over the past years, showing a rapid increase in internet penetration after 2006. Internet usage for individuals in Sri Lanka as a percentage of the total population in 2020 was nearly 35% (World Bank, 2020). As of 2017, over 75% of the 6.2 million (Mn) internet users in Sri Lanka were estimated to access the internet through smartphone devices (Gunawardane, 2017). Therefore, a large proportion of the Sri Lankan population, particularly youth, browse various promotional content through the internet using social media. Thus, extensive tobacco promotion on social media would directly influence the youth, which could lead to a rise in tobacco initiation and a reduction in quitting rates for tobacco use (ADIC, 2022). Hence, it is a key area for policymakers to focus on to achieve the tobacco cessation objectives in Sri Lanka.

In this context, the study aims to identify forms of indirect tobacco promotion on social media in Sri Lanka and assess the influence of social media on the smoking attitudes and intentions of Sri Lankan youth. Moreover, the report will also present selected cases from countries that have implemented regulatory measures on tobacco promotion in social media. Based on the findings, the study aims to aid policymakers with more effective policies to curtail the indirect promotion of tobacco on social media.

2. Current Status

2.1 Sri Lankan Laws on Tobacco Advertising and Promotion

The existing law states that "*A person shall not publish or cause to be published, or authorise the publication of, a tobacco advertisement or an alcohol advertisement*". Tobacco and alcohol advertisements on film, video, radio programme, television or through the internet, where the public can hear or see, is a punishable offence in Sri Lanka. The Act specifically bans all internet communications for tobacco promotion (Sections 35(1) and (4)) *NATA Act, No: 27 of 2006* (*The National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol, 2006*). Box 1 briefly explains the laws in Sri Lanka about tobacco advertising and promotion.

As highlighted in Box 1, Sri Lankan law aligns with *FCTC* Article 13 and its guidelines on tobacco advertising and promotion via internet communications, which cover social media too.

2.2 Social Media Usage in Sri Lanka

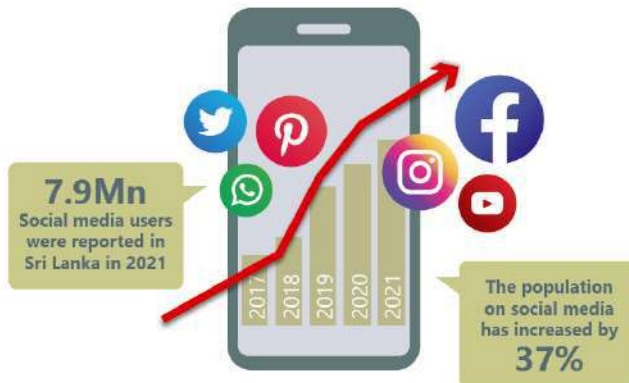
According to the latest available data, nearly 7.9 Mn social media users were reported in Sri Lanka in 2021. This is an increase of 23% (1.5 Mn population) compared to 2020 (Digital 2021, 2021). Nearly 37% of the total population was estimated to be social

Box 1: NATA Act No 27 of 2006

Section 35 (1): General meaning	A person shall not publish a tobacco advertisement or an alcohol advertisement.
Section 35 (4): Tobacco advertisement means	Any writing, still or moving picture, sign, symbol or distinctive colours or other visual image or any audible message which promotes; (a) smoking; (b) the purchase or use of a tobacco product; (c) a trademark (d) a brand name associated with a tobacco product; (e) the name of the manufacturer of a tobacco product.
Section 35 (4): Tobacco advertisement publish means	The inclusion of the advertisement in a film, video, radio programme or television programme or through the internet that is seen or heard, or intended to be seen or heard by the public.

Source: NATA Act.

media users in 2021. Figure 1 illustrates social media usage in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, during the past years, Facebook has been the highest used social media application, followed by Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and other applications. Further, according to a national survey done by the "Seven Media Group" on social media from December 2017 to March 2018, the highest number of social media users were in the 18-44 age group (Seven Media Group, 2018), which include the youth category in Sri Lanka.



Growing social media usage increases exposure to social media-based smoking promotions

Source: 1. Social media stats, Stat Counter, available at: <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/sri-lanka>
2. Seven Media Group, 2018

3. Data and Methodology

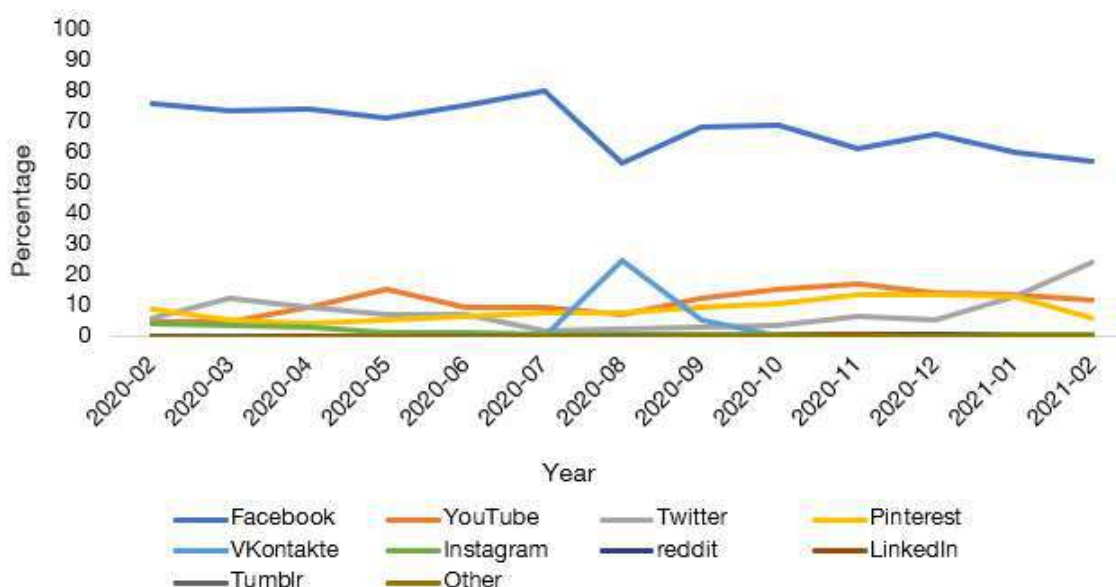
The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods. A participatory and consultative approach comprising desk research and field research was adopted throughout the study. Primary data were collected from a brief online survey and six key informant interviews (KIIs) with industry experts and youth. The literature survey was used as the secondary data source. Content analysis and descriptive analysis were mainly used to analyse collected data.

3.1 Data Collection

The literature survey was conducted using both published and unpublished materials. Reference materials included scientific reports, books, publications, journal articles, working papers, research reports and web-based publications. Three KIIs were conducted amongst youth in the lower grades of education (and also with the key stakeholders representing tobacco researchers, ADIC and CCT).

The study conducted an online survey investigating the social media influence on the smoking attitudes and intentions of Sri Lankan youth. When developing the questionnaire structure, the survey referred to the study carried out by Yoo, Yang, & Cho (2016) on 'How social media influence US college students' smoking attitudes and intentions as a guide.

Figure 1: Social Media Usage



Source: Social media stats Sri Lanka, available at StatCounter: <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/sri-lanka>.

Box 2: Summary of the Process

Objectives	Methodology	Data Sources
Identify forms of indirect promotion of tobacco on social media in Sri Lanka	Qualitative data gathered from the literature survey, KIIs and country case studies were analysed using content analysis with the selected themes, such as; existing social media applications, images, and advertisements	- o Journal articles, published and unpublished data etc. - o Statistics available at the Telecom Regulations Commission Sri Lanka (TRCSL) - o Global Youth Tobacco Survey (GYTS) - WHO (2015) - o NHDR (2014) - o KIIS with researchers of Alcohol and Drug Information Centre (ADIC) and the Centre for Combating Tobacco (CCT)
Assess the influence of social media on the smoking attitudes and intentions of youth in Sri Lanka	Data from an online survey was analysed using descriptive analysis and qualitative data collected from youth KIIs were analysed using content analysis	- o Youth Survey on Social Media Security and Privacy" (2017) by The Sri Lanka Computer Emergency ReadinessTeam Coordination Center (CERT/CC) - o Online-survey was conducted amongst 130 respondents from the randomly selected sample, which represents the youth from universities and other higher education sectors, such as the Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT), The National School of Business Management (NSBM) and technical colleges
Provide / suggest effective policies	Analysis of qualitative data using content analysis with the theme of existing regulations, legislative approach, strategies and enforcement	o Country case studies in Australia, Norway and Thailand

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The National Youth Policy of Sri Lanka (NYP) (National Youth Policy, 2014) identifies persons aged between 15 and 24 as "youth". However, as cigarettes are not sold to persons under the age of 21, the age group for the study included those between 21-35. The upper age limit was extended to 35 years to capture young adults. The snowballing sampling technique was used to identify the sample for the survey. The survey focused on a specific population age group; hence, this method was a more efficient way of locating individuals for the survey sample. The questionnaire created online was shared via the Institute of Policy

Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS) social media. This, along with the snowballing technique, enabled to restrict the survey to some extent. Accordingly, those with access to the internet and social media were included in the survey sample.

The "Youth Survey on Social Media Security and Privacy" (2017) by Sri Lanka CERT/CC found that 45% of users have undergraduate (30%) and postgraduate (15%) qualifications. Further, the higher education sector has been using social media considerably for online teaching and learning due to the present

situation. Thus, a sample of 250 participants was selected based on the data collected through personal contacts. The 130 respondent list represented youth from state universities and other higher education sectors such as the SLIIT, NSBM and technical colleges. A random sequence generated by random.org was used to select the sample.

A few similar cases from other countries that have implemented tobacco promotion regulations, especially on social media, were conducted through secondary research obtained from published reports.

3.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis was mainly carried out using two methods, namely the content analysis and descriptive analysis. Content analysis of qualitative data (primary and secondary) consists of several steps, including preparing the data for analysis, reading through data, coding data, coding to generate themes, and narrating findings from the analysis (Creswell, 2013). Data collected from youth KIIs and literature were analysed using content analysis with the themes of existing social media applications, social media imageries and social media advertisements. Country case studies and stakeholder KIIs were analysed using content analysis with the themes of existing regulations, legislative approach, strategies and enforcement.

Descriptive analysis organised gathered data systematically and described the outcomes in a summarised and constructive order. Descriptive techniques include count, average, quantiles and means (Baha, 2016). A brief online survey data was analysed using descriptive analysis after processing, organising and cleaning the collected data. Various data analysis techniques were used to prepare graphs, tables, and other visualisations.

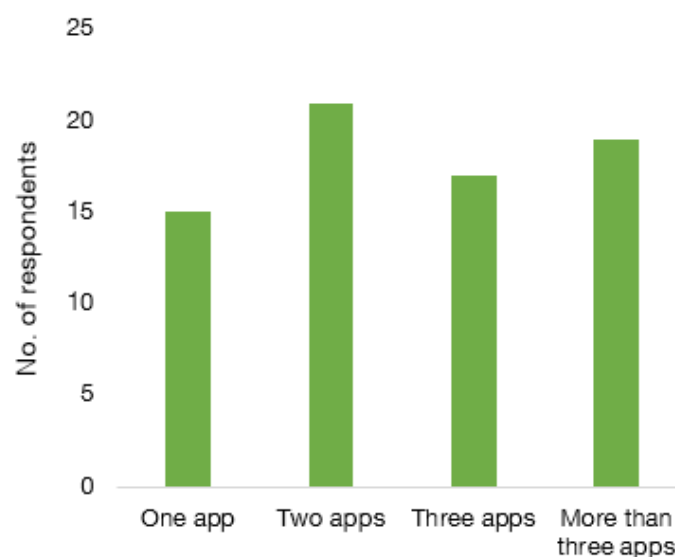
4. Findings

4.1 Brief Online Survey

The response rate of the brief online survey was 57% and can be assumed as satisfactory. According to the literature, the online survey response rate is generally between 30-45% (Nulty, 2008). Thus, the response rate in this survey is marginally higher than the benchmark figure. The highest percentage of respondents was female and nearly 75% of them were employed and the balance consisted of unemployed and student youth. Respondents were employed in diverse areas/ fields. Most were at universities and in academic fields (40% of respondents). Others represented the economic and development sector, IT and communication, law and management, and tourism and hospitality sectors. A summary of the respondents is indicated in the note below.¹

Interestingly, half of the respondents (nearly 50% of them) used more than two social media applications, whereas a quarter (26%) of them used more than three applications (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Number of Applications Used by the Respondents



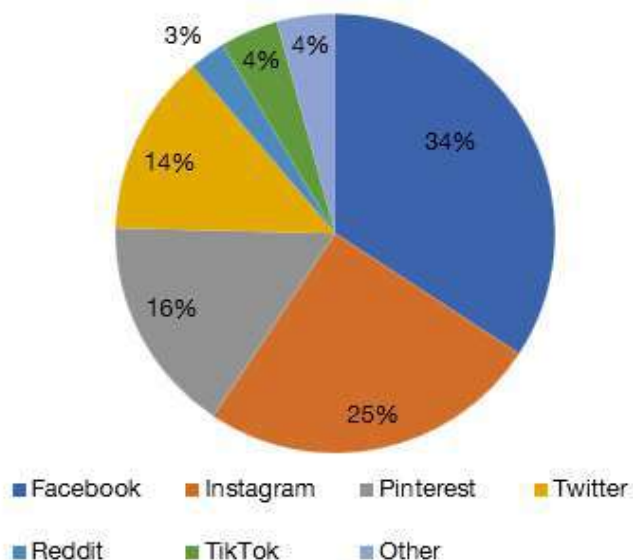
Source: Author calculations based on online survey data.

¹ Note: A summary of respondents in numbers

Respondent	Male	Female
Gender	16	56
1.1 Employed	13	40
1.2 Unemployed	0	3
1.3 Student	3	13
2.1 Regular smoker	1	3
2.2 Occasional smoker	4	6
2.3 Quit smoking	0	2
2.4 Non-smoker	10	46

Most respondents were using Facebook, followed by Instagram, Pinterest and Twitter (Figure 3). This pattern was similar to the existing empirical works.

Figure 3: Usage of Social Media



Source: Author calculations based on online survey data.

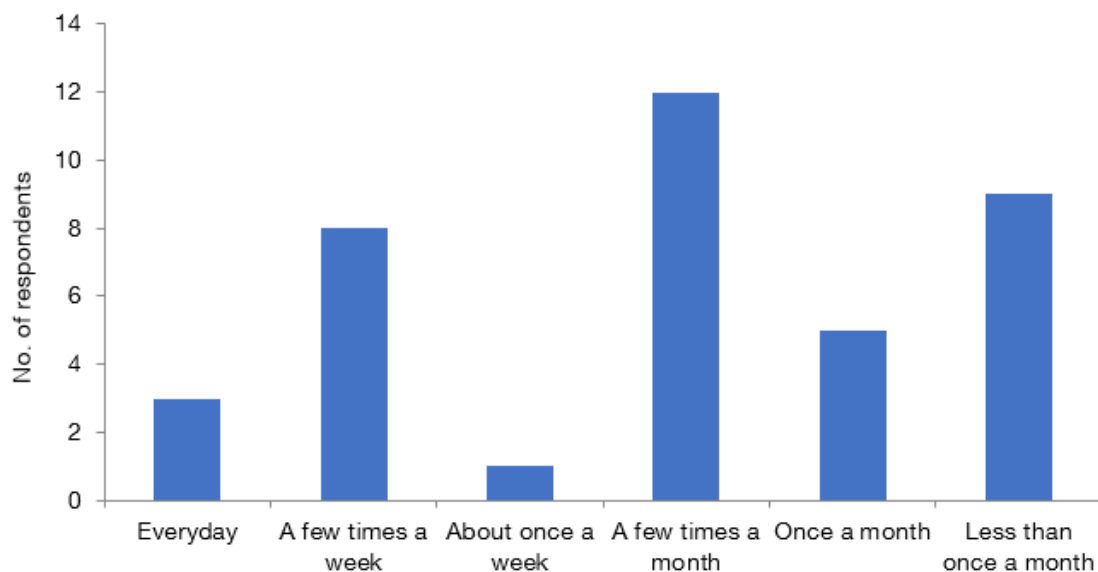
Social media use and smoking imagery

According to the responses received, a higher percentage of the respondents (53%) have seen images of cigarettes, advertisements of cigarettes and/or smoking imagery on social media. Most

“Tobacco advertisement in social media includes writings, still or moving pictures, visual images, audible messages, or any combination promoting tobacco.”

importantly, they have seen these advertisements/imageries a few times a month. Only a handful of them has seen it every day. Tobacco advertisement in social media includes writings, still or moving pictures, visual images, audible messages, or any combination promoting tobacco (The National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol, 2006). Social imageries are user-generated social visuals available on websites which promote tobacco (IGI Global, 2022). This is done by the industry or by the individuals supported by the industry, such as celebrities, including film stars, athletes and other famous characters in society/people in the limelight.

Figure 4: Observing Images of Cigarettes, Advertisements of Cigarettes and Smoking Imagery on Social Media



Source: Author calculations based on online survey data.

Furthermore, most respondents (55%) were unsure whether these posts/sponsored materials appeared in their news feed. However, a lesser percentage (11%) have mentioned that these posts/sponsored materials appeared in their news feed. Only a meager 3% has seen any form of direct advertising on cigarettes from tobacco companies. A few (18% of the respondents) were unsure whether advertisements were from tobacco companies, and most haven't seen any direct advertisements from them. A higher percentage of respondents (63%) have seen smoking and /or cigarette imagery from personal social media accounts and 41% have seen these images a few times a week in their personal social media accounts.

Half of the respondents (whether smokers or non-smokers) who have seen cigarette images or advertisements on social media believed that those images promote tobacco and smoking in general (Figure 5). A few of them (11%) believed that cigarette images on social media didn't encourage smoking. Some (39%) stated that these images on social media neither encourage nor discourage smoking.

Furthermore, almost all respondents have seen content on the dangers of smoking on social media and a few have seen it often. According to survey respondents, 47% have seen warnings and dangers of smoking products, whereas 21% have mostly seen positive smoking imageries.

Regulations on social media

Notably, most respondents were aware of the regulations imposed by the NATA on the imagery on

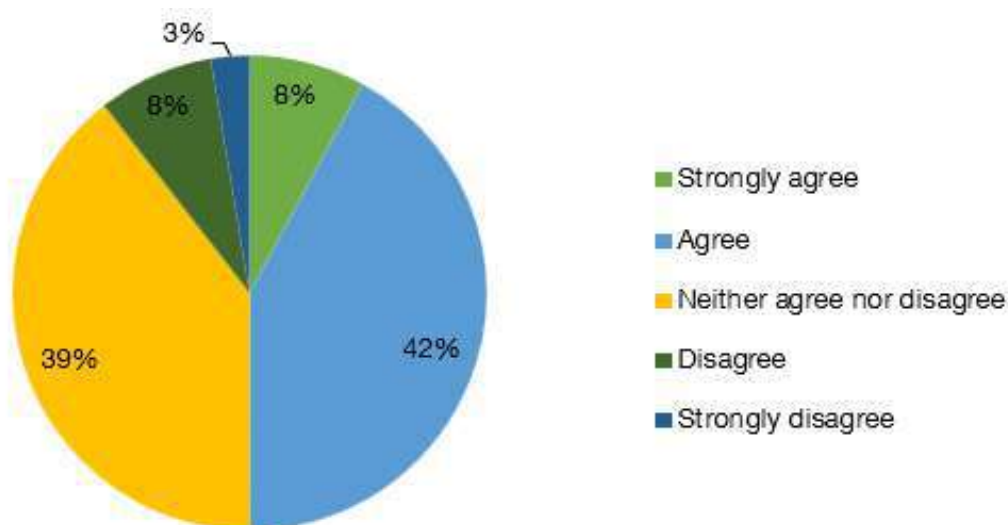
“Half of the respondents (whether smokers or non-smokers) who have seen cigarette images or advertisements on social media believed that those images promote tobacco and smoking in general.”

social media. Interestingly, people who have not seen images of tobacco promotion/ advertisements in social media also wished to have enforceable regulations on the same. Most notably, a higher percentage of them liked to see more content raising awareness of the dangers of cigarettes and smoking on social media.

Smokers' and non-smokers' perspectives on social media imagery

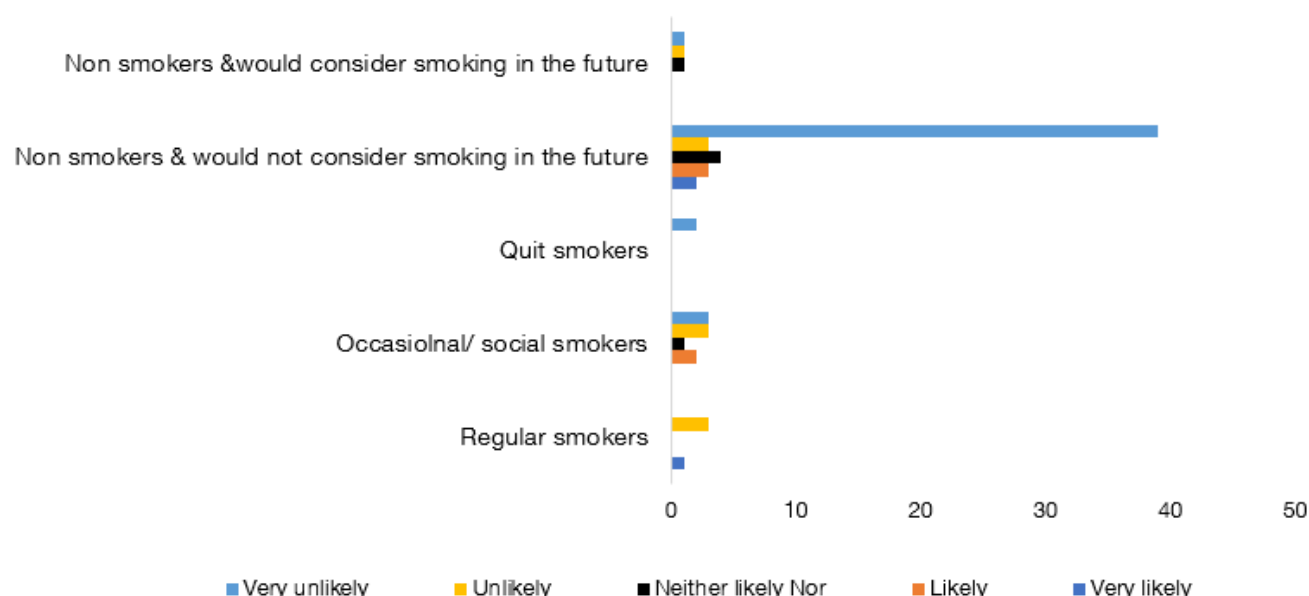
It is interesting to see non-smoker and smoker

Figure 5: Whether Social Media Cigarette Images/Advertisements Encourage Smoking?



Source: Author calculations based on online survey data.

Figure 6: Non-smoker and Smoker Perspectives on Social Media Imageries on Inducing Smoking



Source: Author calculations based on online survey data.

perspectives on social media imageries. Most non-smokers voiced their doubts that the regular smoking imagery induces them to smoke (Figure 6).

Especially half of the non-smokers did not like to see any images of smoking/ cigarettes, whereas few preferred to see images. Surprisingly, quite a few did not mind seeing images on social media. According to the non-smoker group, most agreed that the positive imagery of smoking normalised or reduced the knowledge of dangers or the harm caused by cigarettes. In contrast, very few of them neither agreed nor disagreed with that statement.

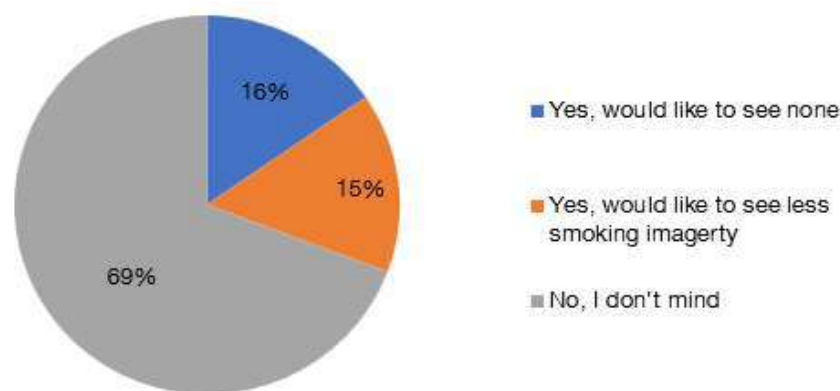
In the smoker category, most smoked less than once a month, whereas a few were everyday smokers. Half of the smoking group smoked 3-5 cigarettes per week, and a few smoked a packet a week.

“A higher percentage of respondents liked to see more content raising awareness of the dangers of cigarettes and smoking on social media.”

As in Figure 7, most smoker respondents (69%) did not mind seeing any imagery of smoking/ cigarette on social media. However, even though smokers, a lesser percentage (16%) did not like to see smoking or cigarette images on social media. Overall, half of them stated that the positive imagery of smoking was likely to normalise or reduce the knowledge of danger/ harm caused by cigarettes. Among them, very few mentioned that it was neither likely nor unlikely.

Kills amongst low educated youth category

Since the online survey mostly covered the educated youth, three selected KIs were carried out amongst youth groups in the low education category representing three-wheel drivers and paddy farmers. They only used Facebook and YouTube as social media platforms. Furthermore, they have seen smoking images on their friends' Facebook pages and mentioned that; "Friends upload smoking images not to promote tobacco or to attract others for smoking. They just do it for fun". However, they were all aware that laws apply to social media images but were unaware of laws governing smoking images. All of them wanted to see more content on social media raising awareness about the dangers of cigarettes and smoking, as well as effective regulations on smoking visual images.

Figure 7: Preference of Seen Images of Smoking in Social Media

Source: Author calculations based on online survey data.

4.2 Country Cases

Countries have taken various measures after identifying the internet as a source of tobacco promotion targeting specific groups of people in society. In Australia, exposure to internet-based tobacco advertising and promotion among young people has risen over the years (Dunlop, 2016). Tobacco advertising grew by 8% from 2010 to 2013, starting from 21% in 2010, while branding grew by 6% from 20% in 2010. Facebook was the most commonly cited social media platform for encountering tobacco branding and promotion in 2013 (22% of all branding). However, the country has enforced regulations regarding social media promotion of tobacco. The Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (MCDS) supported the Australian Government in amending the Tobacco Advertising Prohibition Act 1992 (TAP Act). The purpose of this move was to prohibit advertising more explicitly on the internet in 2007 (Department of Health, Australian Government, 2007). The Tobacco Advertising Prohibition Amendment Bill 2010 introduced to Parliament was expected to impose restrictions on tobacco advertising on the internet and online sales.

The legislation aimed to strengthen the TAP Act by making it a specific offence to advertise or promote tobacco products on the internet (Parliament of Australia, 2010). While the amendment aims to regulate tobacco advertising by Australian websites, overseas websites by foreign companies can still promote tobacco on their websites, which are visible to Australian internet users.

The Cabinet of Thailand first issued an executive order banning Thailand Tobacco Monopoly (TTM) from advertising tobacco and a total ban on all forms of foreign cigarette advertising, both direct and indirect,

in 1988. In 1989, tobacco products were placed under the category of "harmful products", making this Cabinet Decree a fully-fledged law. In the same year, the National Committee for Control of Tobacco Use (NCCTU) was established, formulating official policies on the tobacco industry (Chantornvong, 2011). In 1992, Parliament passed the Tobacco Product Control Act, which banned advertising, promotion and sponsorship. Here, "advertising" was defined as "an act undertaken by any means to allow the public to see, hear, or know a statement for commercial purposes (Vathesatogkit, 2011)". In 2004, the Department of Public Relations responded to the proposal presented by the Ministry of Health in Thailand on issuing regulations to ban tobacco companies involving promotions using their names and logos through their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities via electronic media, such as television and radio broadcasting. However, tobacco companies use print media and the internet to promote their CSR activities (Vathesatogkit, 2011). Currently, the law related to tobacco in Thailand contains a general ban on tobacco advertising and promotion (Art. 30). It explicitly prohibits tobacco advertising; upon or within printed matter, tapes or other video media, motion pictures, television broadcasts, radio broadcasts, electronic media, computer networks, or advertising signs (Art. 31). Tobacco advertising is prohibited in the internet communications that occur through electronic media and computer networks. Consequently, the law aligns with the FCTC Art. 13 guidelines for tobacco advertising through internet communications (Tobaccocontrol laws, 2021). Still, the advertising of tobacco via the internet and cross border advertising and depiction of smoking in movies shown in cinemas are observed in Thailand (Vathesatogkit, 2011) by violating the existing laws and regulations. Therefore, constant vigilance is necessary.

Currently, in Norway, the Act and regulations on tobacco contain a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising. Hence, tobacco advertising through internet communications is also prohibited. The law aligns with the FCTC Art. 13 guidelines concerning tobacco advertising through internet communications. The law specifically restricts tobacco product sales to those registered with the Directorate of Health. Furthermore, the law has banned the remote sale of tobacco products to consumers in European Economic Area countries that have already imposed bans on remote sales of tobacco (Tobaccocontrolaws, 2021).

In Sri Lanka, tobacco and alcohol advertisements on film, video, radio programmes, television or through the internet where the public can hear or see, are a punishable offence. The survey found that people observe images of cigarettes, advertisements of cigarettes, and smoking imagery on social media. Therefore, Sri Lanka must constantly be vigilant about existing laws and regulations violations.

“Tobacco and alcohol advertisements on film, video, radio programmes, television or through the internet where the public can hear or see, are a punishable offence. The survey found that people observe images of cigarettes, advertisements of cigarettes, and smoking imagery on social media.”

4.3 Findings of Stakeholder KIs

This section highlights some of the strategies and programmes suggested by the key stakeholders to strengthen the existing law on tobacco advertising.

Almost all of them mentioned that the NATA has a key role to play as the main government authority. Since the law is already implemented, the NATA needs to take appropriate actions to enforce the law effectively.

“It is important that the enforcing agency take actions against those who violate the laws”.

KII with tobacco researcher

Further, they highlighted the importance of having a well-developed mechanism for law enforcement and monitoring. Moreover, they emphasised the importance of updating the policies with the changes in technology.

“Strong policies and laws on paper are not useful unless these are effectively implemented. There could be gaps in policies, sometimes, policies are not updated but a well-developed law-enforcement and monitoring mechanism must be in place”.

KII with tobacco adviser

Moreover, KII respondents stressed that; since the law is already implemented in Sri Lanka, the enforcement of the law is more important and it is the responsibility of all stakeholders to support the enforcement activities. In addition, some of them suggested that it is crucial to raise awareness amongst the general public on the existing advertising and promotion laws and the tobacco industry and its strategies for product promotions.

“It is the responsibility of all stakeholders, including the government, the NATA, health authorities, media and researchers, to take necessary actions to ensure the effective enforcement of the laws”.

KII with tobacco researcher

“While taking necessary actions to enforce the existing law effectively, it is also important to create awareness among the general public on the laws and tobacco industry and its strategies on attracting smokers”.

KII with tobacco researcher

“Since the law is already implemented in Sri Lanka, the enforcement of the law is more important and it is the responsibility of all stakeholders to support the enforcement activities.”

promotions via telephone, mobile phone, and short message service (SMS).

Further, these laws must be periodically reviewed and updated to address developments in industry tactics, media technology, as well as new types of tobacco products or cigarette substitutes. Moreover, obtaining the support of civil society organisations and other stakeholders is vital in successfully enacting and enforcing bans on indirect promotional activities. Finally, the government could introduce an age-restricted access system which can discourage minors from visiting the website and viewing the advertisements.

5. Policy Suggestions and Conclusions

In Sri Lanka, successive governments have included tobacco cessation as a policy objective and have successfully implemented policies, such as increasing cigarette taxation, restricting mass media advertising and prohibiting smoking in all public places. However, Sri Lanka has not been able to successfully implement regulations to ban indirect promotion, especially via the internet.

The study report showed that the youth groups use two or more social media applications and social media penetration in Sri Lanka was at 30% in January 2020. With such high market penetration, cigarette producing companies continue to promote smoking through social media, directly and indirectly.

Hence, it is essential that Sri Lanka commit to rigorous and appropriate policy measures to reduce the negative effects of indirect cigarette advertising on social media. As identified during the survey, a greater percentage of respondents preferred to see more awareness of the dangers of cigarettes on social media. They also desired to have enforceable regulations on tobacco on social media. Moreover, most of them preferred to see far better regulations on social media. However, regulating indirect promotions is much more difficult than direct ones. Therefore, following international best practices is vital.

It is critical to strengthen laws prohibiting tobacco advertisements from being streamed over the internet. Furthermore, it is important to make no exceptions to existing laws to cover all provisions (very broadly) of advertising and promotions, including advertising and

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