

Graphic health warnings on tobacco packages: Investigating perceived effectiveness of graphic images among college students in Maldives

Author: Angeela Naseer, Dr. Aishath Aroona & Dr. Mariyam Suzana (PhD)

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Background

The implementation of a Graphic Health Warning (GHW) on tobacco packages took place on the 31st May 2019 (MOH,2020). According to GHW regulation, it is required to rotate GHW yearly. Since the implementation of GHWs, there have been no known studies to investigate the effectiveness of currently used GHWs nor on which GHWs to use in the next year.

The general objective of this research was to explore the perceived effectiveness of GHW images displayed on tobacco packages among college students in the Maldives, aged 18 years and above. The objectives of the research were:

1. What is the level of knowledge on the health risk of tobacco use among college students above the age of 18 years?
2. What is the attitude towards GHWs?
3. How effective are the GHW labels currently used on tobacco products in the Maldives?
4. Which of the globally available GHWs are most effective for future use in the Maldives?
5. What behaviors do young people, particularly smokers adopt to avoid GHW?

The results of this study can be used by policymakers to understand the effectiveness of the current GHWs and it can create evidence for future use and research in the area. Moreover, the result of this study can identify the effectiveness of some common GHWs used in other countries to identify effective graphics for future use in the Maldives. Understanding of knowledge and attitude towards GHWs among the youth and avoidance behaviors adopted by them can help design targeted interventions for such subpopulations.

Methodology

A cross-sectional quantitative study design was used to investigate the perceived effectiveness of GHWs. Stratified random sampling method was used to collect data from 371 respondents from five selected colleges (MNU, Cyryx college, Avid college, Clique college, MI college). A well-structured online questionnaire was used to collect data. Ethical approval was obtained from the NHRC (NHRC/2020/018) and MNU ethics committee. A sample size of 375 students participated in this study. Data was analyzed by using SPSS version 20.0. Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate demographic variables. Inferential statistics were used to evaluate the differences of knowledge, attitude towards GHW among smokers and non-smoker.

Results/Findings & Implications

2.7% of the female college students and 33.8% of the male students were smokers. Across age groups, 15.6% of the 18-24 year olds were smokers, 16% of the 25-34 year olds, 15.4% among 25-44 year olds and 11.5% of the 45 years and above age group smoked. Among the smokers, 25.9% were occasional smokers, 13.8% smoked more than 20 cigarettes a day and 60.3% smoked less than 20 cigarettes a day. Respondents correctly answered 91% of that assessed their knowledge of the health risk of smoking. 58.7% strongly agreed with the effectiveness of GHWs compared to text warnings. 46% strongly agreed that graphics on cigarette packages worried them about their health and 60% of all the respondents believed that the negative effects could happen to them if they smoke or continue smoking. 21% smokers attempted to quit smoking after seeing GHWs. The result also showed that 13% of respondents had received tobacco packs without GHWs from dealers or shops. The most common avoidance behavior (33.8%) among smokers was to conceal/hide the pack with a picture of liking, using paper, cover with wrapping or with tape. Out of 15 GHW images selected from the WHO FCTC Health warnings database that are currently used in Thailand, Bangladesh, Vanuatu, Mauritius, Singapore, Brazil, 3 images received a score above 73%. These three images showed conditions that depicted lung cancer, mouth cancer and throat cancer.

The fact that some respondents have received cigarette packages from dealers and shops without graphic health warnings calls for more vigilant monitoring of the implementation of the Regulation 2019/R158 on "Packaging and Labelling of Tobacco Products". This study established the prevalence of smoking among college students. A small percentage had a very high frequency of daily consumption, which advocates for targeted interventions for this specific

sub population. The incongruence between the high level of knowledge of the health risk and the smoking prevalence and avoidance behaviors demonstrates the need to further study the reasons why knowledge is not getting translated into behaviors.

Conclusion

Knowledge of health risk of smoking is high among college students. Majority strongly agreed that GHWs were disturbing and were more effective compared to textual warnings. A quarter of the sample had applied different avoidance behaviors such as concealing or hiding the images on the cigarettes packing. Images that depicted cancers of the lung, mouth or throat were found to be the most effective.

The full paper can be accessed from:
<http://saruna.mnu.edu.mv/jspui/>