

Cigarette Smoking by Children in Developing Countries: A Problem Whose Time Has Come?

This is an overview of my ACCI presentation which was promoted by the expectation of future health problems for children who smoke cigarettes in developing countries, and by the possibility that their smoking behavior has been encouraged by psychological influence techniques employed by marketers. Corrective measures based on psychological principles are suggested for coping with the influence techniques and for decreasing cigarette consumption in developing countries.

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The attention of the U.S. Congress has been recently focused on the hazards of cigarette smoking. Of special concern have been the hazards for children, with legislators wrestling with the issues of appropriate controls on cigarette manufacturers and marketers. Although the discussion has centered on the health dangers to American children, a far greater problem exists abroad and especially in developing countries where cigarette sales are increasing very rapidly.

In this very brief overview of the problem, we skip over the health hazards of smoking along with the growth in cigarette sales for different regions of the world. We start by presenting the principal cigarette marketing practices that have been singled out for attention by critics:

1. Advertising in general, and children oriented advertising in particular.
2. Sponsorship of sports and entertainment events.
3. Hiring young women to distribute free cigarettes in bars and hotels, and at public events.
4. Providing free or low-priced promotional merchandise (e.g., T-shirts) to consumers with cigarette brand names prominently displayed on the merchandise.

How should developing countries respond to these various marketing threats to the health of their young people? Numerous corrective practices have been proposed by the critics:

1. Advertising initiatives (complete bans, partial bans, and counter-ads).
2. Health warnings (on packages and/or in ads).
3. Tax increases on cigarettes.
4. Bans on sponsorship of sports and entertainment events.
5. Bans on promotional merchandise.
6. Bans on distributions of free cigarettes.
7. Bans on smoking in public places.
8. Limiting access of minors to cigarettes (e.g., outlawing vending machines).
9. Mass media initiatives (discouraging smoking scenes in feature films and primetime television, and especially those scenes in which the hero or heroine is smoking).
10. Educational efforts (directed at smokers and non-smokers).

The pros and cons of these various initiatives were discussed in my ACCI presentation from psychological and sociological perspectives. Examples were given of actual initiatives taken by corporations, governments and educators to deal with cigarette smoking in children in developing countries.

Endnotes

1. Professor, Department of Psychology