Tobacco use in films

Tobacco promotion in films

As bans on tobacco advertising become more widespread, the tobacco industry has switched to alternative ways of promoting their deadly products. Films are an important medium for tobacco product placement, indirect tobacco advertising and social learning about tobacco use. Research suggests a causal relationship between exposure to depictions of tobacco use in films and youth tobacco use initiation.

The tobacco industry spends millions of dollars on the depiction of tobacco use in films. Films are viewed globally, effectively promote tobacco use and are subject to little public health scrutiny. Films reach huge audiences who view them not only in cinemas, but also on television channels, DVDs and the internet.

Product placement

A key way the tobacco industry markets its wares is via product placement in films. Product placement occurs when a product or brand name is placed by film makers within films and television programmes in exchange for money, services or gifts. It is an inexpensive way of promoting tobacco products and tobacco use to a captive audience.

Product placement is disguised tobacco advertising and promotion that builds brand recognition and associates products with popular stars, often in exciting settings, gaining implied celebrity endorsement.

Influencing behaviour

The tobacco industry needs to build the image of tobacco and tobacco brands through marketing. Films shape dreams and fantasies, and help establish and reinforce social norms. They often depict tobacco use as glamorous and 'cool', associating it with beauty, masculinity, sophistication, fun and success.

Film stars are role models for young people and their onscreen tobacco use helps to promote the harmful addiction to tobacco. This depiction does not usually show the reality of tobacco use or its health consequences such as death and disease. Instead, the depictions are often more similar to those of tobacco advertising.

Tobacco exposure in films leads to youth tobacco initiation

Exposure to tobacco use in films is high, in both adult and youth-rated films. Young people attend the cinema more frequently than other age groups. Research has found that exposure to tobacco use depictions in films increases tobacco use initiation and continuance among young people. In fact, the higher the exposure to tobacco use in films, the higher the likelihood of initiation. Many new users are recruited through their exposure to onscreen tobacco use.

Reducing the exposure of young people to onscreen tobacco use will help prevent initiation. Films are one of the last places where young people can be exposed to depictions of tobacco use without restrictions. These depictions undermine tobacco control efforts, especially those aimed at young people.

A global industry

Tobacco depictions in films have a global reach. Films made in countries such as Egypt, India and the United States have an impact far beyond their borders. In Egypt, tobacco use has been on the rise since the 1950s and its depictions have changed. Increasingly, women have been shown using tobacco. Depictions of waterpipe use, once confined to gangsters, now present a wide range of people participating.

Banning or restricting the use of tobacco in films made in one country can benefit people in other countries. This is particularly true for countries

with significant film industries that export their products. If countries that are markets for film exports take measures such as including tobacco use in ratings policies, this creates an incentive for filmmakers to change their behaviour. A global approach is needed.

Regulating tobacco depictions in films

Even countries that ban tobacco advertising and promotion rarely regulate the depiction of tobacco use in films and television. Filmmakers often claim dramatic necessity and free speech in defence of onscreen depictions of tobacco use. However, any comprehensive tobacco control programme must include measures to regulate exposure to onscreen depictions of tobacco use. This is particularly important for substantially and permanently reducing tobacco initiation and use among young people.

Article 13 of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) requires a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship in all forms of commercial communication. This includes the depiction of tobacco use in films. Cross-border advertising is covered by the ban, allowing countries to restrict entry of banned advertising and promotion into their territories.

Best practices and the way forward

Tobacco control strategies should seek to change the behaviour of the film industry by making the industry responsible for restricting tobacco use in the films it makes. Voluntary self-regulation agreements with the tobacco industry do not work because the interests of the industry and public health are opposed. Guidelines for implementation of Article 13 of the FCTC recommend the following.

▶ Film production companies should certify that they have received no money or other benefits from tobacco companies to display tobacco products or their use in their films. This can be applied to imported films as part of their exhibition licence.

▶ Film production companies must stop showing identifiable tobacco brands in films. This would reduce tobacco branding, a key element of tobacco marketing.

▶ Films should receive an adult rating if they show tobacco use or brand imagery. This can reduce youth exposure. Exceptions can be made if the depiction shows the harmful consequences of tobacco use.

▶ Film companies and cinemas should be required to screen anti-tobacco advertisements before all films that contain images of tobacco and tobacco use. These should not be produced by the tobacco industry and should be culturally and linguistically appropriate.

▶ Films that show tobacco products or use should not receive public subsidies for their production. Tax allowances can also be restricted to films without tobacco depictions.