



Impact of Pictorial Health Warnings of Tobacco Packages on the Youths of Manipur, India

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Abstract

Tobacco use related deaths and diseases are notably the most preventable epidemic in the world. Over millions of people have died in the last century and many more millions of deaths are expected in the 21st century. In order to prevent or reduce these deaths, awareness of the devastating effects of tobacco use and promoting the number of quit rates are two of the most important steps, besides, other proven effective tobacco control measures. Hence, pictorial health warnings of tobacco packages have been introduced primarily to warn people about the effects of tobacco use and to promote tobacco cessation among the users. 106 students (male-55, Female-51) from the age group of 15-19 years were interviewed with the help of an interview schedule. The analysis of data was done through grounded theory approach. The findings suggested ineffectiveness of the pictorial health warnings in preventing and promoting tobacco cessations and tobacco initiation among the youths. In many cases, the warnings were taken for granted. In order to make more effective in controlling tobacco use, pictorial health warnings must be accompanied by other intervention strategies. Educating parents and older people to teach their children about the meaning and significance of the warnings, because, children would barely understand or care about the meaning of the pictorial warnings.

Keywords: Qualitative study, Pictorial health warnings, Tobacco product packages, Ineffectiveness.

Introduction

Graphic health warnings that depict the possible consequences of tobacco use are an increasingly common feature of tobacco product packaging around the world. Canada was the first country to introduce graphic health warnings, replacing text-only health warnings in 2000, with Brazil following in 2002¹. Two of the most important objectives of implementing pictorial health warnings and images on tobacco packages are to help tobacco users to visualise the nature of tobacco-related diseases, and to warn the devastating effects of tobacco use to the non-users. Pictures and images must deliver messages to the people that tobacco use can cause serious illnesses and can even kill the user².

The first statutory warning in India, "Cigarette smoking is injurious to health", was stipulated under the Cigarettes (Regulation of Production, Supply and Distribution) Act of 1975, Section 2 (m) and Section 3. It was laid down that all cigarette packages and their advertisements ought to carry the warning in the language used in the brand. Other tobacco products, notably bidi, gutka or smokeless tobacco products were not covered by this warning. However, the Cigarettes Act of 1975 was repealed on July 30, 2009, a month after coming into force of the new pictorial health warnings on all tobacco products (Figures-1 and 2) under the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Product (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution)

Act (COTPA), 2003³. COTPA Section 7 of India requires all tobacco products to bear pictorial warnings and its rules prescribe covering 40% of the principal display area of the front panel of the tobacco packs. Most of the guidelines prescribed under international best practices have been followed in implementing Article 11 of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (Packaging and labeling) in India^{4,5}.

Evidence shows that health warnings and messages that contain both pictures and text are far more effective than those that are text-only. They also have the added benefit of potentially reaching people with low levels of literacy and those who cannot read the language(s) in which the text of the health warnings or messages are written. It was also shown that when compared with text-only, health warnings and messages or pictures: are more likely to be noticed; better communicate the health risks of tobacco use; provoke more thoughts about the health risks of tobacco use and cessation; increase motivation and intention to quit; and are associated with more attempts to quit. It may also disrupt the impact of brand imagery on the packaging and decrease the overall attractiveness of the package⁴. Therefore, it is very important to depict large and prominent health warning on tobacco packages as it has a positive impact on public health. It is said that pictorial warnings on tobacco products further reinforce the impact of the written health warnings. The images help tobacco users visualise the nature of tobacco-related diseases and convey health messages in a clearer way. In other words, the warnings

are intended to serve as visual cues to prompt tobacco users to take action to quit⁵. The present paper is an attempt to examine the effectiveness of pictorial health warnings from the perspective of tobacco users and non-users of the rural youths.

Methodology

This paper is a result of community based qualitative study conducted on 106 students of one higher secondary (12th Standard) school (name of the school kept in anonymity), of Ukhrul district headquarter, Manipur. The overwhelming majority of the students came from their respective rural villages. The district is one of the 9 districts of Manipur State, inhabited predominantly by the Tangkhul Naga people. For the

purpose of data collection, fieldwork was conducted in the month of November and December 2014.

Out of 106 students, 55 and 51 were male and female respectively, with over half (54 users) of them were current tobacco users (male-38, female-16) of one form or the other. While female participants only consume smokeless tobacco, male consumes both types of tobacco. They all belong to the age group of 15-19 years. Before proceeding with data collection, the participants were informed about the aims of the study and topics to be discussed. They were made aware of the data collection processes, including tape-recording and transcription of their responses and interviews. They were also informed about the anonymity of the research data they will be providing.



Figure-1
Pictorial health warnings displayed on all tobacco product packs in India, from May 31, 2009⁵



Figure-2
Pictorial health warnings displayed on all tobacco product packs in India, from December 1, 2011⁵

Data collection was primarily achieved through interview and questionnaire method self-administered by the researcher himself. Questionnaire with an open ended question, "According to you, how effective is pictorial warnings in controlling tobacco use?" was asked and distributed to all the participants. They were asked to note down their responses, opinions and experiences below the question, where enough space was provided in the questionnaire. Questions in the questionnaire include, age and sex of the respondent, status of tobacco use and the core question indicated above. The students were also given a choice to note down their responses either in their own tongue or English or mix, whichever they find easier in expressing their views. Unlike in the case of face to face interview setting, one very important advantage of this method is the freedom to pen down their opinions and experiences on a piece of paper without any interference or hesitancy, and without actually revealing their real identity. The principle of not revealing the identity of the respondents in any adolescents or youths study is very vital to its success, especially in drugs or substance abuse studies. For instance, Sack and Westwood (2003)⁶ would say that confidentiality is the cornerstone of any therapeutic relationship with youths. Without clarifying the limits of confidentiality one may well get incorrect or incomplete information about what one is looking for.

The analysis of data began with the initial translation of the responses and opinions into English from the local language. It was followed by application of the 'grounded theory approach'⁷ using techniques such as, organization of data, coding and categorization of data and interpretation. The analysis of data was further supplemented by observational data collected during fieldwork and secondary data from books, articles, journals, newspaper, internet sources, etc. Verbatim anonymous quotes have been used extensively in this paper to illustrate the findings.

Results and Discussion

Health warnings on tobacco product packages are a generally accepted part of tobacco control strategies worldwide, with many countries requiring tobacco packages to include some form of health warning that alerts users to the potential health risks of tobacco use. In the present study, mixed responses were observed from the narratives of the respondents. While, majority of the youths (70%) said that pictorial warnings on tobacco packages have "not been effective" or "not enough" in controlling tobacco use among the people, there was also another group of youths (30%) who agreed that it has been effective in controlling tobacco use among the youths.

"Not effective": An overwhelming majority of the youths were of the opinion that pictorial health warnings, irrespective of the types of picture have not made a significant impact on the effort to control tobacco use prevalence and initiations among the youths. When asked about the subject, the most common narrative observed from the responses was "not effective".

According to them, despite having seen the warnings, numbers of users have been increasing exponentially among the adolescents, with no signs of quitting. Since people, especially the users have been seeing the health warnings almost every after few minutes or hour, according to this group of youths, they have learned to take the health warnings for granted, that they have become immune to the warnings in their everyday lives. Consequently, even if they saw the warnings, they failed to notice the warnings. For instance, a 19 year old female non-user was of the opinion that since, the warnings have become so familiar with the users that they have learned to ignore it. She said in the following words, "Pictorial warnings of the tobacco packages have become a kind of daily usual things for the users, because, even if they know and saw it they just ignored it. People knew that it is bad, but still they use it they don't pay any hit to it".

It is said that pictorial health warnings on tobacco packages capture attention, educate effectively about the health hazards of tobacco use and make tobacco product unattractive to the people especially the youths. It also encourages users to think about the health consequences and cessation. On the contrary, when 18 year old male non-user was asked about the effectivity of the pictorial warnings, he noted that people have discarded; they do not care about it anymore. Moreover, because tobacco use related diseases like lung and mouth cancers have not struck at them or their near ones, it will be hard to convince them. This was how he has to say in the following words, "It is not effective. Many users have taken these warnings for granted. They do not care about it. They smoke and chew like tobacco related diseases will never strike on them. The warning is like design to them. When they saw these warnings for the first time, they might have felt something, but slowly, it does not matter anymore in their lives. They have completely discarded the warnings".

They say a picture can speak a thousand words. Pictorial warnings and images are meant to help users to visualise the nature of tobacco-related diseases. They should make them aware that tobacco use can cause serious illnesses and can kill the user. The pictorial warning should be strong to be effective and should repel the users. However, for the 19 year old female tobacco users, it was nothing but a mere display of pictures. According to her, it has not conveyed enough messages on her. She said in the following words, "In my opinion, pictorial warnings have not made a significant impact in my tobacco use behaviour and even in others' case as I have observed. We users don't really give serious thoughts about the warnings. In short, we don't care about the warnings, evident from the continued use of tobacco". In a similar manner, a 19 year old male user expressed his opinion that despite noticing the warnings he cannot stop anymore due to addiction. Therefore, he said in the following words, "It is not effective anymore for me and many like me even after knowing the consequences of using tobacco. Many of us could no longer get rid of it due to addiction. We are aware of the various threats caused by the use of tobacco, but

the force of addiction has overpowered our intention to quit maybe”.

“Not enough”: It was also observed from some narratives of the respondents that pictorial health warnings did not make much sense to the younger youths, especially for the adolescents. Because, some of them have started using tobacco as early as when they were 8-10 years old. According to them, when they were young, they were least affected by what they saw in the tobacco packages. As a result, they were least bothered by the warnings. In other words, there was no significant impact on the adolescents behaviours, because, they were unable to understand the importance of the warnings and the nature of the diseases mentioned in the tobacco packages. For instance, 18 years old male smoker was of the opinion that pictorial warnings on tobacco packages will not help much in preventing tobacco use uptake among the adolescents, because, they are unable to comprehend the meaning of the pictures. This was how he has to say in the following words, “When I was a kid and even now, tobacco packages was everywhere at my sight, however, health warnings even if it was there, I never used to notice. As a kid, I was unable to understand the meaning of the pictures. Moreover, the disease ‘cancer’ was alien to me and many of us. Hence, we could hardly make any sense out of it”. Furthermore, according to some of the youths, although, they have heard and seen cancers several times in pictures, as they have not seen in real life or since, it has not occurred to them, merely hearing and seeing in pictures could not become a protective factor for the non-user, nor for the users to quit. This was suggested in some selected narratives of the respondents as follows, (17 year old male non-user) “According to me, it has not been much effective as our society still less educated about it; most of us took it for granted. In addition, many of us have not seen the nature of cancer infection although we have always heard of it”. (18 year old male user) “Pictorial warning has no any effect in controlling tobacco use. It has become just a mere cover picture for us users. We no longer pay attention to what is written”. (17 year old female user) “We have become so familiar with the warnings that we tend to forget about the warnings. The reason is that it has not occurred to us, nor we have seen cancer patients caused by chewing tobacco”.

Likewise, pictorial health warnings were also reportedly “not enough” even to those adult users who could read and understand the message. According to them, the effect of the warnings was seen only during the time when they saw the pictures of mouth and lung cancers for the first time. In other words, when they saw the warnings for the first time, they said they were strongly motivated and prompted to stop smoking and chewing tobacco. However, their stronger addiction to tobacco use took the sway. Hence, they said pictures could not save them from persisting use of tobacco products. In this regard, a 19 year old female tobacco user has to say in the following words that, “Pictorial warnings might tend to appear effective in conveying the dangers of tobacco use to the people, but hardly will it be enough in enabling us (users) to quit. The pictures did

look frightening, but sadly, it was short lived. Addiction got so strong that we users tend to ignore the importance of the pictures”.

“Effective”: The effectiveness of pictorial health warnings in controlling tobacco use was also reported in some of the narratives of the youths. According to them, pictorial health warnings help the users and non-users in raising awareness of the risks of tobacco use (smoking or chewing); users’ knowledge of the health effects of smoking and chewing; encouraging cessation, and discourage tobacco use uptake or relapse. In other words, health warnings of tobacco packages capture attention, educate effectively about the health hazards of smoking, chewing and it makes tobacco use unattractive. For instance, a 19 year old male smoker noted the effectiveness of the health warnings that it has reminded him about the ill effects of smoking. Although, it has not helped him stop from smoking, it has at least reminded him about the danger of smoking from time to time which may prompt him to quit someday. He said in the following words, “In my opinion, health warnings of tobacco packs or sachets would definitely help some of the users to quit. However, to a person like me, it has somehow reminded us about the ill effects of tobacco use, which might want us to quit in the near future”.

Pictorial health warnings have also helped in bringing about positive attitudinal and behavioural changes associated with tobacco cessation. It has helped some users to quit from smoking and chewing of tobacco even in this study. According to the narratives of 18 and 17 year old male non-users, they have reportedly witnessed their friend and a member of their families who have quitted smoking and chewing after seeing the health warnings on the tobacco packs and sachets. Moreover, they said it has also conveyed a message about the danger of tobacco use that might have helped them to remain as non-users. (18 year old) “According to me, pictorial health warnings have helped both the users and non-users in controlling tobacco use and uptake. It has always reminded us about the danger of tobacco use, which in other words might be the reason for me to remain as non-user. Moreover, I have also seen a friend of mine who have already stopped smoking after seeing the pictorial warnings” (17 year old). “I think this is one of the best ways to control tobacco use. It also keeps us away from trying. Moreover, I have also seen one of my family members who have quit tobacco chewing after seeing the pictorial warning of mouth cancer on tobacco sachets”.

Pictorial health warnings of tobacco products are also an important source of conveying information of adverse health effects of tobacco use and on the constituents of tobacco products. In other words, it frequently highlights threatening consequences of tobacco use to attract attention, induce fear of negative consequences, and motivate message recipients to change or prevent from tobacco use uptake. For instance, when asked about the effectivity of pictorial health warnings, a 19 year old female user noted that, “Pictorial warning is very

effective for the users and non-users, because, it keeps reminding them about the danger of tobacco use. It is also effective even to the illiterate users and non-users, as they can read the warnings which come in the form of pictures". Another female respondent also reiterated that the effectivity of the pictorial warnings might not have significant result on the users, who have developed an addiction to smoking or chewing. However, it will greatly prevent people who have not started using tobacco. The following was what she has to say about the subject, "I think, here we got mixed responses. While, those people who are already addicted may still continue regardless of the warnings, those who have not started may restrain from it after timely seeing of the warnings".

Discussion: While many previous studies worldwide have come up with success stories of the impact of pictorial health warnings in controlling and preventing tobacco use, it would be surprising to note that the present study has come up with otherwise result, with exception to few youths who said that the warnings have been effective. In other words, the findings of this study have enlightened us with mixed response of basically two different types of views and experiences of the youths.

The first and overwhelming majority of the youths expressed pictorial warnings not being effective or not enough in controlling and preventing tobacco use initiation. The primary reasons for this ineffectiveness came from the fact that the youths were unable to understand the significance of pictorial warnings, which was supposed to convey and warn people about the dangers of tobacco use due to their lack of knowledge about the diseases. Despite having observed the warnings several times, they failed to make much sense out of it. In other words, since some of them have started using tobacco at the very young age (9-10yrs), they were unable to comprehend the kind of warnings portrayed in the tobacco packages. Consequently, given their young age, vulnerability and inability to read or take cognizance of things around them, pictorial warnings do not tend to make much impact on pre-adolescent and adolescent boys and girls of the present study. Even as they grew older, when they began to realise the risk of taking tobacco, the health warnings on tobacco packages became something like an obsolete force unable to motivate people due to their strong addiction towards tobacco smoking and chewing. Eventually, they began to receive the warnings for granted or ignored the warnings knowingly the risks of tobacco use. In other words, when people became addicted to tobacco use, the motivating force conveyed by pictorial health warnings became less important and ineffective due to addiction. In a similar study, Arora *et al.*,⁵ concluded that pictorial health warnings on tobacco products in India are not fulfilling their intent to warn people about the hazards of tobacco use and do not provide motivation to quit tobacco or prevent its initiation. This was primarily due to illiteracy and poverty, where tobacco users are found to be highest among the poorer and illiterate population of the country. According to their study, the poor and illiterate tobacco users of India will not make any sense of these pictures,

at the same time they cannot read the written warnings (Smoking Kills & Tobacco Kills) despite having observed the warning labels. Therefore, they said non-users illiterates might initiate tobacco use out of ignorance about the adverse effects of tobacco, which has the potential to lead to increasing health problems among the poor and illiterate population.

In a similar study, Karinagananavar *et al.*² found that most of the tobacco users have seen pictorial warnings of tobacco products, but hardly few of them have comprehended the warnings correctly. The present pictorial warnings were able to motivate very few tobacco users to quit/reduce tobacco use. Therefore, the impact factor was very less among tobacco users. Besides these two studies, the present study also shares some similarities with Aruna *et al.*⁸ and Oswald *et al.*⁹ studies that suggested poor credibility and little comprehensibility of the health messages to show the truth about the health effects of tobacco use.

Having discussed about the ineffectiveness of the pictorial health warnings observed in the narratives of the respondents, the other aspect of the finding, although, reported by fewer youths are also an equally important part of the findings worthy of discussion. Besides, nature of the study being qualitative, in which every piece of revelation or information provided by the respondents is held equally important in the study. It was observed in some of the narratives that pictorial warnings have been able to convey messages about the danger of tobacco use, consequently enabling some youths to remain as non-user. It has also been successful in motivating few of them to stop smoking and chewing tobacco. These effective and successful stories of the present study have been shared by several other previous studies reported from all over the world. For instance, the use of pictorial health warnings as an effective measure to convey health education^{10-12,1,8,19} warnings in the form of pictures are better effective than text-only warnings to capture attention, and the communicated information is memorized for a longer time^{13,14}. They are also direct and cost-effective means of communication, because they reach every tobacco user and have a continuous impact as users are confronted with a warning message every time they have a packet in their hands¹⁵.

There is also evidence that pictorial warning labels reaches everybody to all sections of the people. According to Reddy and Arora, since tobacco use in India is inversely related to education and is the highest among the illiterate and low literate groups pictorial health warnings will help to reduce the disparities in health knowledge by providing the poor and rural tobacco users with regular access to health information^{16,17}. In other words, pictorial warnings are comprehensible even for individuals who rarely or never read anything, because a message in graphic form is more rapidly captured and easier to understand than a text message. Even those population groups whom health education normally fails to reach will notice pictorial warning messages¹⁸.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it was found in this study that the present pictorial health warnings on tobacco packages were unable to convey the intended message to the majority of the youths, especially to the pre-adolescents and adolescents. As a result, it has not made much positive impact in preventing tobacco use initiation. Secondly, the present form of pictorial health warnings, although were successful in conveying intended message to the older youths, they were no longer a motivating force to quit tobacco use due to the stronger factor of addiction. Owing to this fact, they began to overlook health warnings or messages with exception to a few who have tried to quit and accomplished after seeing the warning messages. It was also possible that the notion of smokeless tobacco being less harmful than smoked tobacco might have let the youths especially the females (who only uses smokeless tobacco) to ignore health warning messages displayed on tobacco packages. However, the size of the pictorial health warnings on tobacco packages may not necessarily be effective in controlling tobacco use among the people, especially the youths, unless it has to be complemented by other interventions measures, such as, continuous education of the people, educating parents and older people to teach their children about the meaning and significance of the warnings, because, children would barely understand or care about the meaning of the pictorial warnings, effective implementation of prohibition of sales to minors and other proven effective measures.

Limitations of this study: The study is not without limitations. Firstly, the participants were small in number which does not necessarily represent the whole population of the study area. Since, respondents' views and opinions were given in written form; it was not possible for the research to verify whether they have conveyed their true response to the questions. In other words, whether they have responded truthfully or not the researcher will have to only rely on those responses.

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