

LETTER to the EDITOR

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Tobacco Control in the Present Era: A Need for Inclusive Strategies

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Dear Editor

We recently read the article titled 'Prevalence, Reach of Anti-smokeless Tobacco Messages and Quit Attempts by Product Type: A Secondary Data Analysis from the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS – 2016-17)' by Chatterjee et al. [1] discussing the various patterns of smokeless tobacco (SLT) usage and the impact of media messages on tobacco quit attempts. We would like to take this opportunity to discuss various aspects of the study that warrant further attention.

The authors present a cross-sectional study on evaluating the role of traditional media formats like newspapers, radio, and television in individuals quitting SLT habits. However, as the study incorporates secondary data from the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS 2016-17), it fails to include the most important and flourishing aspects of digital platforms and social media. The authors emphasis on the traditional formats is significant, but in today's digital era, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have a huge impact on an individual's life and thereby decision making as they can be great tools for conducting health discussions, especially amongst the youth. It should be noted that these social media platforms can serve as excellent means to engage a broader and targeted audience, making the interactions more interactive which can thereby improve the effectiveness of anti-tobacco campaigns. These contemporary platforms can help us better understand the medias impact as the incidence of smartphone usage and internet access is steadily increasing in India. Future study models should incorporate longitudinal studies that evaluate the medias influence over a period of time. This would help establish a causal relationship between media exposure and quit attempts and the impact of social media at large. Understanding the long-term sustainability of anti SLT or tobacco quit attempts influenced by media campaigns can also be monitored and evaluated by such methods.

The study also inferred that a higher incidence of media exposure and SLT quit attempts is present among the urban male population as opposed to rural residents and women. This points to a crucial aspect in our society regarding the socio-economic disparities and higher levels of illiteracy in certain demographics that might be working as barriers to the impact of anti SLT campaigns. The marginalised population in rural areas and individuals with lower literacy rates tend to have limited access to different media

platforms and thereby reduced access to health information on various quit-tobacco campaigns [2]. Tackling such discrepancies are crucial and require tailored strategies like leveraging social and local influencers, organising community-based interventions, and exploiting different means of audio-visual or multimedia messages which have been proven to be more effective in such settings [3].

Another critical aspect that should be addressed is the changing trends in tobacco usage, especially among the younger generation, primarily with an increasing incidence of the electronic cigarettes and vaping. Electronic Nicotine Delivery systems (ENDs) were introduced as means to reduce the ever-increasing tobacco consumption both in smoking and smokeless form. It has been reported that the adolescent using e-cigarettes and vapes has increased in many countries [4]. This shift is perhaps due to the perception that these products are relatively safer alternatives to traditional tobacco products. This trend can potentially pose a new challenge in tobacco control efforts. Products categorized under ENDs often contain nicotine which can be addictive and may eventually lead to conventional tobacco use. There is a need for anti-tobacco campaigns to modify and adapt to these changing trends. One way could be by including messages that are appealing to the youth and address the risk factors associated with vapes and e-cigarettes. Targeting social media platforms and engaging the youth where they are most active can significantly increase the reach of these campaigns. It also becomes imperative to understand the specific reasons behind preferring a tobacco or SLT product or some means of nicotine delivery systems. In India, numerous tobacco products are readily and easily available including Gutkha, Zarda, Mishri, Khaini, each with its regionally specific and culturally significant patterns. Information regarding cultural practices, cost and accessibility of such products can help curate more effective and tailored tobacco cessation programs. Such type of granular approach is necessary to address and tackle the root cause of using varied smoking and smokeless tobacco products and developing tailored interventions for the same.

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Reply to the letter to the editor: Tobacco Control in the Present Era: A Need for Inclusive Strategies

Dear Editor

We thank the authors for their observations and comments. We fully agree that in the current scenario, the social media plays an extremely important role not only in terms of quitting tobacco use but also for initiation and sustenance. We know that the tobacco industry is using the social media extensively, especially targeting adolescents, and that influences the entire trajectory of tobacco use. Since ours was a secondary data analysis, it was limited by the information available in the original dataset of the Global Adult Tobacco Survey 2016-17 that was confined to the traditional media [1]. We agree that future studies on this topic ought to focus more on the role of social media towards influencing all aspects of tobacco use behavior.

The issue of newly emerging tobacco products like electronic cigarettes has assumed a great importance rather recently. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, aided by the opinion of the experts and a white paper from the Indian Council of Medical Research [2] has comprehensively banned electronic nicotine delivery devices (ENDS) and heat-not-burn products through special legislation in 2019 [3]. It is however clear that with targeting of adolescents by the industry, despite ban, adolescents are more aware and they experiment more with ENDS than adults [4]. This is surely a cause for public health concern and it requires more work.

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