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Is the industry reviving the old promotional strategies to promote new tobacco products in Indonesia? A social psychology perspective

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Introduction

Social psychology is the scientific study of how the social condition and human relationships as individuals and groups could influence an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Kassin et al., 2017). The topic of social-psychology studies on behavior is divided into two phenomena, intrapersonal and interpersonal. In the context of marketing and changing consumer behavior, intrapersonal phenomena such as persuasion and attitude were the most often topics to be studied in social psychology (Hogg and Vaughan, 2017).

Social psychology studies on persuasion, attitudes, and consumer behavior has played an important role in the development of commercial product promotion, including tobacco (Rucker et al., 2015). Various kinds of marketing and promotion effort for tobacco products has been going on for a long time (Pennock, 2007). However, since the ratification of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) which prohibits tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship, efforts to promote and market tobacco products by the Industry have become very limited (World Health Organization, 2012).

Currently the situation has changed a lot, after decades of being constrained due to tight regulations on tobacco advertising, promotion, and sponsorship in almost all countries in the world, the tobacco industry has finally found momentum to exploit the situation. Along with the rapid development of digital media, the emergence of new tobacco products that can circumvent tobacco control policies has now provided the industry with more freedom to promote its products (de Andrade et al., 2013). Therefore, understanding the past marketing strategy of the industry including those marketing that uses social psychology approach is necessary to prevent countries falling into the same trap.

This article uses social psychology theories to examine the past promotional strategies used by the tobacco industry and discuss how they have been repeated for new tobacco products in Indonesia using the information from the latest survey findings on e-cigarettes retail stores (Komite Nasional Pengendalian Tembakau, 2022) and social media promotion (Ramadhan and Bigwanto, 2022).

How social psychology theories have been used by the tobacco industry

Despite skepticism about the correlation between attitudes and behavior change, the literature on persuasion and its relationship to attitudes continues to grow in social psychology, especially in areas related to political propaganda and advertising. It has been argued that under certain conditions, attitude can definitely predict what people say and do (Hogg and Vaughan, 2017). Therefore, any attempt to change another person's attitude is worth trying, especially when it comes to promoting commercial products.

One of the classical discoveries in social psychology related to how to change another person's attitude is the mere exposure effect, also known as the familiarity effect (Zajonc, 1968). The logic is simple: the more you are exposed, the more you are familiar with a product, which can lead to a positive attitude toward the product. This concept is quite effective in changing the attitudes of others. For example, a cross-sectional study among German schoolchildren in 2013 reported an association between exposure to Marlboro advertising and liking it: students with a higher level of exposure to advertising tended to like the brand (Morgenstern et al., 2013).

Another model that is also widely used in marketing and advertising is the use of persuasive communication, a concept that is often referred to as the Yale model. This model was first studied and published at Yale University in response to the needs of the United States government for a national propaganda campaign during world war II. To be more effective in persuading others, the model focuses on three aspects of communication: the communicator (who), the message (what), and the audience (to whom) (Hovland and Janis, 1959).

Persuasive efforts will be more effective when the communicator is an expert or someone who is considered to be popular and attractive to the audience. In the early 1920s, the tobacco industry started to use medical doctors to advertise cigarette products in the United States (Morgan, 2014). The industry knows very well the importance of medical doctors as health experts in its advertising. This approach was used long before the public was informed of the evidence about the dangers of smoking to health (Proctor, 2012).

Besides the person who delivers the message, the message itself must be able to attract potential consumers. The tobacco industry often used an evaluative advertising approach to persuade its target consumers. This approach emphasizes more emotions and feelings than conveying facts about the quality of the product (Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1984; Hogg and Vaughan, 2017). Although both methods have their advantages, and their effectiveness will depend on the character of the audience (Venkatraman et al., 1990), the two approaches are often compared in advertising discipline, using the term 'thinking vs. feeling' message. The evaluative advertisement usually involves the emotion of feeling good and superior to

attract target consumers (Reynolds, 1999). This strategy has continued to be used even after the government issued a banning regulation on displaying products in cigarette ads, as cigarette brand slogans such as "Go Ahead" and "Bukan Main" (unbelievable) can still be used in cigarette advertising.

The approach is quite effective (Ambler et al., 2000), especially when the message is echoed by an element that describes common phenomena in young society, such as "just do it," "don't resist," or "right hand giving, left hand selfie." The goal is to depict enjoyment and freedom from fear to their target consumers: the young generation (Ling and Glantz, 2002). It is like saying whatever you are doing, you will be fine. By adding this emotional element, advertisers successfully created the impression that the product is part of consumer identity and considered representative by their target consumers (Nichter et al., 2009).

Another important aspect of persuasive communication is the audience, especially their perspective on the message or products. The dual-process theory explains how the human brain generally processes information. In general, there are two pathways in how we process information in our brain: the conscious and the unconscious. Most of the time, our brains rely more on unconscious processes than conscious processes. This is because a conscious process takes a long time, and we often do not have much time and energy to process all the information through conscious processes (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

Most cigarette advertisements do not involve complex information in their promotion. In delivering information and encouraging consumers to buy their products, they take advantage of six (unconscious) short-cut routes: reciprocity, consensus, liking, consistency, scarcity, and authority (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2002). The reciprocity process usually requires direct contact (e.g., using sales). The others can be targeted through promotional efforts, such as consistently showing that the products are used by many people, including celebrities and people in authority, and convincing the target audience that they will lose out if they do not buy the products (scarcity). This can also be done using corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities to establish a good image in the community (liking).

Reviving old cigarette advertising and promotion to promote electronic cigarettes in Indonesia

Cigarette ads that use medical doctors as models might be an old strategy that has been banned around the world. However, with the emergence of new tobacco products such as electronic cigarettes, this old method seems to have been revived as a promotional strategy. Figure 1 is an example of how a doctor's name is currently used as a store name for product promotion. The same thing happened in the news media where electronic

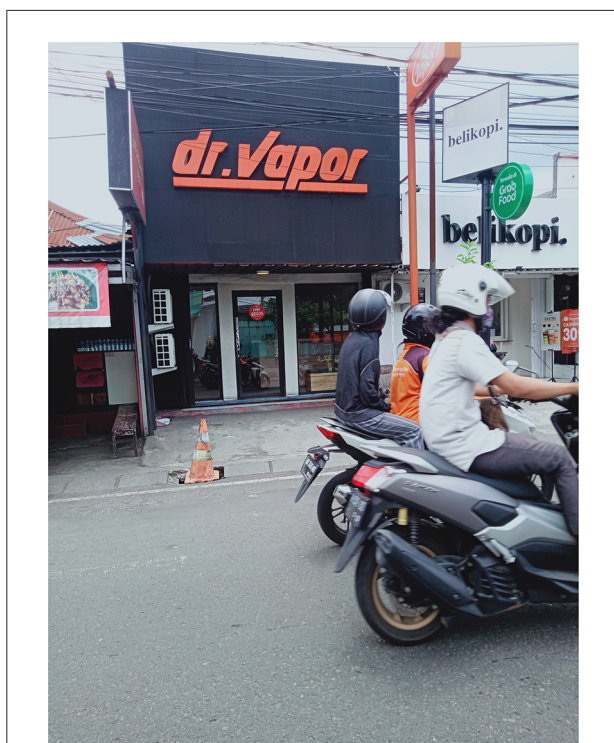


FIGURE 1
An example of e-cigarette retail store in Jogjakarta (Komite Nasional Pengendalian Tembakau, 2022).

cigarettes have been promoted as a healthier alternative to cigarettes and a solution to quitting smoking (Pangestu, 2019). This same strategy was used in the past when the tobacco industry introduced mild and light cigarettes. As a result, smokers tended to believe that light and mild cigarette products were less harmful to their health (Shiffman et al., 2001).

Although the credibility of those claims has been criticized and refuted through various studies (Editorial, 2015; Skerry et al., 2018; Brose et al., 2019), the claims continue to be delivered as part of the promotion strategy. The use of experts in news media campaigns has also occurred. For example, communicators who have promoted e-cigarettes are embedded with influential identities such as the former deputy director of the World Health Organization (WHO) (Royke, 2021). As a result, the perception of e-cigarettes as less addictive and less harmful products has been reported associated with e-cigarette use among high school students in Jakarta (Bigwanto et al., 2019).

Besides using experts, based on retail survey findings, celebrities are also involved in the e-cigarette business in Indonesia (Komite Nasional Pengendalian Tembakau, 2022). The latest celebrity involves in the e-cigarette business is “Dewa 19,” a famous Indonesian group band in the 1990s (Kintoko, 2022). Previously there was another popular group band called “Slank” that participated in selling and promoting e-cigarettes

(Noviandi, 2021). Although currently there is no evidence to what extent this phenomenon will have a negative impact on public health, but considering its large number of followers and their “position” as public figure; consensus and liking effect (unconscious short-cut routes) for the products could be easily achieved. Therefore, its worst possible effects cannot be ignored.

The messages used for promoting the new products remain the same as it was for cigarettes, attempting to touch the emotions of their target consumers so that they are interested in using the new products. Lifestyle related messages such as “forever young” and “smoking is so yesterday” are attempted to illustrate that using this new product is something cool and stylish. The only difference is the new products do not follow current tobacco control regulations, therefore we can find the promotion that shows or demonstrate the product use during a promotion (Ramadhan and Bigwanto, 2022). The industry is also well aware of how to tailor its messages. When it comes to the government, the focus of their message switches to something more related to the government agenda, such as reducing smoking prevalence and supporting the smoke-free agenda (Hidayat, 2021).

Discussion

Taking advantage of new communication media and the gray area of tobacco control regulation, the industry has succeeded in reusing old ways of promoting cigarettes for new products, this includes implementing effective persuasive communication and evaluative marketing approach to persuade new customers and increasing the promotion frequency to reach mere-exposure effects. Besides the magnitude of exposure, using a public figure as a communicator could increase the positive attitude and intention to use the products (Phua et al., 2018). As a result, e-cigarette use among youth in Indonesia has increased dramatically from 1.2% (National Institute for Health Research Development, 2016) to 10.9% (National Institute for Health Research Development, 2018), much higher compared to >15 years old population from 0.3% (World Health Organization, 2011) to 3% (World Health Organization, 2021).

Those conditions will certainly set back efforts to reduce tobacco consumption in Indonesia, instead of reducing it, Indonesia may experience a double burden of tobacco control (Bigwanto, 2019). Therefore, serious efforts such as a counter-campaign from the health authority in collaboration with a public figure and youth group need to be made. This could be done by exploring the full potential of inoculation-based health messages (Compton et al., 2016) to increase awareness and fortify attitudes and beliefs that people already have so that they are not easily influenced by the industry’s persuasion. For instance, developing a creative message that appealed to youth groups that could empower them to defend themselves, increasing their independence and identity. However, this

approach should be accompanied by strict regulation to create a supportive social condition, this includes banning all forms of tobacco advertising and promotion.

To increase public awareness, another solution is the implementation of pictorial health warnings on the packaging of new tobacco products. The pictorial health warnings implementation on cigarette packs is one example of how social psychology has been used to implement effective tobacco control measures (Strahan et al., 2002). Previously it was concluded that the implementation of pictorial health warnings could be deterring people from uptaking cigarettes and encourage smokers to quit (Ratih and Susanna, 2018). However, smokers also reported performing other behavior when dealing with the scary pictures on the cigarette pack, such as tearing or throwing the packs after buying and buying single-stick cigarettes, therefore stronger enforcement is needed (Soerojo, 2015). Furthermore, the same reason why the industry regularly changes its promotional campaign or slogan; to minimize the general wear-out effect, health warnings images also need to be replaced regularly (Woelbert and d'Hombres, 2019).

Social psychology also has a significant contribution to the explanation of psychological aspects and smoking behaviors (Mettlin, 1973; McGowan and Shahab, 2017). However, given the emergence of new tobacco products, studies related to the new products are still very much needed for now. For instance, whether the content used for promoting new tobacco products will lead to the increase of e-cigarette users among youth and finally normalize smoking behavior in society (Sæbø and Scheffels, 2017), and what is the impact of digital media's rapid development on all form of tobacco use, is there any personality or antecedents' variables influencing the behavior. All of them need to be answered to get the best program intervention for public health.

Ultimately, just like any other science, the application of social psychology can have both negative and positive impacts,

depending on who uses it and how it is used. Therefore, the government has an obligation to issue strict regulations in order to protect youth from being exposed and manipulated by advertising and promotion of new tobacco products. On the other hand, the public health community, together with social psychologists should work hand in hand in creating the best campaign to support tobacco control programs in Indonesia.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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