

## PORTRAYAL OF SMOKING BEHAVIOUR IN THE MEDIA: A CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIAN FILMS

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper analyses the portrayal of smoking in 20 Malaysian films. As suggested by previous studies, an analytic approach was used to record and analyse occurrences of actual and implied smoking behaviours in a list of selected films. Findings indicate that, despite the ban on tobacco products in the local advertisement media, smoking is highly prevalent in local films aimed especially at young viewers. Other elements of smoking behaviours including the presence of cigarettes and other smoking paraphernalia, the smoker characteristics, the location and social context of an event, and the verbal and nonverbal tobacco messages are also discussed. The occurrence of smoking episodes in each interval was recorded on a coding sheet. We recorded both actual and implied smoking behaviour (e.g., holding or smoking a lit or unlit tobacco product); the presence of cigarettes or other smoking paraphernalia (e.g., cigars, matches, and ashtrays); and environmental messages, including “no smoking” signs, tobacco advertising, and tobacco merchandise. Additionally, we noted smoker characteristics (e.g., gender; whether lead, supporting, or other character); location (i.e., outdoors or in a bar, restaurant, home, or car); the social context of the event (i.e., smoking alone or with others and whether consideration was shown to non-smokers). We also noted verbal and nonverbal tobacco messages (i.e., positive or negative consequences of smoking behaviour and discussion about tobacco products, including positive, negative, or mixed reference to tobacco use).*

### 1.0 Introduction

In the effort to reduce the prevalence of smoking, the Malaysian government has enforced a complete ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship in The Control of Tobacco Product Regulations 2004, issued under Food Act 1983. This effort is especially timely when, according to the Ministry of Health (2008), a recorded 21.5% of the Malaysian population smoke. Meanwhile, the World Health Organisation (2012) has also reported the prevalence of smoking among the Malaysian adult population at 26 % for any smoked tobacco and 24% for cigarettes in 2011.

Although the ban on tobacco products in advertisement and other promotional media has been fully enforced in Malaysia, not much is known if the portrayal of smoking behaviour is also controlled in other media. Films, for instance, are known to have the potential to contribute to the allure of smoking (Jackson *et al.*, 2007) and this happens through various channels including cinemas, DVDs, internet downloads and reruns on television.

The relationship between initiation of smoking behaviour and exposure to portrayal of smoking in films has been established by many studies (see for example, Goldberg; 2003; Titus-Ernstoff *et al.*, 2008; Tickle *et al.*, 2001; Distefan *et al.*, 2004; Sargent *et al.*, 2005;

Pechmann & Shih, 1999; McCool *et al.*, 2005). Similarly, the National Cancer Institute (2008) has established the causal relation between portrayal of smoking in films and smoking initiation among youth.

In a study by Jackson *et al.* (2007) it was found that movie and television exposure can be used to predict smoking initiation among white and black adolescents. Their study revealed that white adolescents who had higher exposures to R-rated movies demonstrated significantly higher smoking initiation tendencies. Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, Goldberg (2003) reported that teenagers who had higher exposures to American movies were more likely to experiment with cigarettes, to be current smokers or intend to smoke in the future. These tendencies are similar among children in New Hampshire and Vermont (Titus-Ernstoff *et al.*, 2008).

Tickle *et al.* (2001) reported that adolescents whose favourite movie stars use tobacco on screen are likely to have an advanced smoking status and positive attitude towards smoking. This phenomenon could be attributed to the aspirations of adolescents to model after their favourite stars. Similarly, Distefan *et al.* (2004) found similar trends among adolescent girls who showed more than 80% increased odds of smoking if their favourite movie star smoked.

Films are known to contain high depictions of smoking (Hazan *et al.*, 1994; Stockwell & Glantz, 1997; Ryan & Hoerrner, 2004; Goldstein *et al.*, 1999; Escamilla *et al.*, 2000). According to Hazan *et al.* (1994), 36% of the intervals in the films produced between years 1960 to 1990 contained references to tobacco. Next, Stockwell and Glantz (1997) continued the research based films produced in 1990-1996 and found increased depiction of smoking in films produced in 1990s. Considering the influence of films among adolescents, a study to find out if the levels of smoking references in the local films are indeed high would prove to have its practical significance.

Apart from adolescents, children are also not spared from the exposure to portrayal of smoking in films. Ryan and Hoerrner (2004) recorded 106 occurrences of tobacco exposures in Disney's animated feature films produced between 1937 and 2000. Goldstein *et al.* (1999) in another study reported that 56% of the G-rated animated films produced by Walt Disney Co., MGM/United Artist, Warner Brothers Studios, Universal Studios and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox from 1937 to 1997 contained portrayal of smoking.

Hazan *et al.* (1994) found that the depiction of smoking in films was mostly positive and pleasurable for its users. The main motives of smoking were for relaxation including "rites of passage, ritual smoking and pensive moment" (Hazan *et al.*, 1994, p. 999). Besides, smoking was generally portrayed as a healthy behaviour whereby it was used to reduce stress and anxiety. In experiments conducted by Pechman and Shih (1999), portrayals of smoking in movie scenes aroused the ninth graders, enhanced their perceptions of smokers' social stature, influenced their perception that smoking was socially acceptable and increased their intent to smoke. With the positive depiction of smoking references and the absence of anti-tobacco messages, the young viewers are influenced into believing that the use of tobacco is beneficial and acceptable.

Guided by the study by Escamilla *et al.* (2000), this paper aims at analysing the portrayal of smoking in 20 box-office Malaysian films produced in 2011.

### **1.1 Theoretical Framework**

In studying the portrayal of smoking in Malaysian-made films, it is important to understand how symbolic communication via mass media influences human thought, affect, and action. Thus, social cognitive theory of mass communication by Bandura, an expanded version of his seminal social cognitive theory is used as the theoretical framework. Bandura (2001) theorized that diffusion of new behaviours functions in terms of a triadic reciprocal causation between personal determinants, behavioural determinants and environmental determinants. These three determinants, according to Bandura (2001), all operate as interacting determinants that influence each other bi-directionally. He stated that all behavioural, cognitive and affective learning can be achieved through observation, and this can happen intentionally or unintentionally from one's environment. "Although much of the social learning happens from one's immediate environment, a vast amount of information about human values, styles of thinking, and behaviour patterns is gained from extensive modelling in the symbolic environment of the mass media (Bandura, 2001, p. 271)."

Bandura (2001) believed observation learning is governed by four major sub functions namely—attention, retention, production and motivation processes. Within the context of this study, the research addresses the attention function, whereby film viewers would pay attention to the symbolic images depending on factors like salience, affective valence, complexity, prevalence, accessibility and functional value of the behaviours. While the social cognitive theory of mass communication supports the correlation of smoking images in films to the adoption of smoking, it is important to recognise the limitations of this study. Human behaviour may be observed via the media, however, other determinants may take place, one of such is that people are "...self reactors with a capacity for self-direction" (Bandura, 2001, p. 267)

## **2.0 Methodology**

### **2.1 Sampling**

For the purpose of the study, only full-length Malaysian feature films over 40 minutes were included for the study. The top 20 highest grossing films (box-office) were selected from a total of 42 Malaysian feature films produced in 2011 (National Film Development Corporation Malaysia, 2012). The total gross collection of the sample stood at RM 93.2 million as of 24 January 2012, which accounted for 86% of the total box-office collection for Malaysian films produced in 2011. The genres, ratings and amounts of gross collection of the selected films are shown in Table 1.

As of March 2012, the Film Censorship Board (2012) classified films into 3 categories—U, PG 13 and 18. The sample contained 5 films under category U, 14 films under category PG 13, and 1 film under category 18 as listed in Table 1. U classification represented films that were suitable for general viewing and for all ages, PG 13 represented films which required parental guidance for viewers below ages 13 and 18 represented films were appropriate for viewers above 18 years of age.

**Table 1: Genre, Rating, and Gross Collection of Selected Films**

Ranking	Title	Genre	Rating	Gross Collection (RM million)
1	<i>KL Gangster</i>	Action	PG13	11.74
2	<i>Ombak Rindu</i>	Drama/Romance	U	10.9
3	<i>Hantu Bonceng</i>	Horror/Comedy	PG13	8.53
4	<i>Kongsi</i>	Action/Comedy	PG13	8.1
5	<i>Khurafat</i>	Horror	PG13	8.08
6	<i>Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa</i>	Drama/Action/Epic	U	6.5
7	<i>Nur Kasih The Movie</i>	Drama	U	4.93
8	<i>Bini-biniku Gangster</i>	Action/Comedy	PG13	4.71
9	<i>Karak</i>	Horror	PG13	4.3
10	<i>Suatu Malam Kubur Berasap</i>	Horror/Comedy	PG13	4.07
11	<i>Raya Tak Jadi</i>	Comedy	PG13	3.64
12	<i>Alamak Toyol</i>	Horror/Comedy	PG13	3.47
13	<i>Aku Bukan Tomboy</i>	Comedy/Romance	PG13	2.55
14	<i>Al-Hijab</i>	Horror	PG13	2.24
15	<i>Songlap</i>	Drama/Crime	18	2.13
16	<i>Sekali Lagi</i>	Romance	U	2.04
17	<i>Flat 3A</i>	Horror	PG13	1.44
18	<i>Misteri Jalan Lama</i>	Adventure/Drama/ Mystery	PG13	1.33
19	<i>Sini Ada Hantu</i>	Comedy/Horror	PG13	1.3
20	<i>Kembar Siang</i>	Comedy	U	1.21

Source: National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (2012) & Cinema Online (2012)

## 2.2 Data Analysis

For the purpose of this study, smoking references are defined as display of inhalation of tobacco, both actual and implied behaviour (eg smoking cigarettes and conversations about smoking) and smoking paraphernalia (eg cigarettes, cigars, lighters, matches, ashtray, cigarette packs) (Escamilla *et al.*, 2000)

The researcher also recorded the social context of smoking behaviour (eg alone, with others) and location of smoking behaviour (eg bar, home, streets, and alleys) in a standardized coding sheet. Besides, subjective qualitative data on the smoking references such gender and character of the smokers and the consequences of smoking were also observed (Escamilla *et al.*, 2000). During film viewing, each film was divided into 5-minute intervals (Hazan *et al.* 1994; Escamilla *et al.*, 2000.) Next, the lead researcher played the video and recorded the name of the film, total running time, smoking references, context and location in the standardized coding sheets. Each smoking reference was coded only once during a continuous display. However, within the same interval, smoking reference

was recorded more than once if there was a change in scene. Finally, the data from the coding sheet was tabulated and summarized using percentages in Microsoft Excel 2003.

### 3.0 Results

The total footage of the twenty films amounted to approximately 32 hours. For the purpose of analysis, it was divided into 380 5-minutes intervals. From a total of 20 films, 85% of the films contained at least one depiction of smoking. However, three films did not portray any smoking references at all—*Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, *Raya Tak Jadi* and *Flat 3A*. *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* was a period film based on the adventures of *Merong Mahawangsa*, set in ancient historical Kedah while *Raya Tak Jadi* was a festive comedy produced for Hari Raya Aidilfitri which depicted positive values for audiences of all ages. Meanwhile, *Flat 3A* was a horror flick about the terrifying experiences of tenants in a haunted flat.

**Table 2: Occurrences of Smoking Behaviour, Context and Location**

Categories of Portrayal	Occurrences in each 5-min interval	
	Frequency	%
<u>Smoking paraphernalia and behaviour</u>		
Smoking	74	19.47
Cigarettes	20	5.26
Electronic cigarettes	0	0.00
Cigarette packs	7	1.84
Matches, lighter	3	0.79
Cigars, pipes, or smokeless tobacco	5	1.32
Ashtray	15	3.95
<u>Social context of smoking behaviour</u>		
Alone	19	5.00
With others (non-smokers)	28	7.37
With others (smokers)	1	0.26
With others (smokers & non-smokers)	43	11.32
Consideration shown to non-smokers	7	1.84
<u>Location of smoking behaviour</u>		
<u>Indoor:</u>		
Bar/lounge/clubs	18	4.74
Home/apartment/condo	14	3.68
Office	1	0.26
Shopping malls	0	0.00

Restaurant	5	1.32
Pool centre	2	0.53
Market	5	1.32
Warehouse	4	1.05
Toilet	1	0.26
Hotel	1	0.26
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<u>Outdoor:</u>		
Educational institution	2	0.53
Street/alleys/sidewalks	21	5.53
Food stall	8	2.11
Street stall	1	0.26
Veranda or Roof top	2	0.53
Train station	2	0.53
Clubs	1	0.26
Home compound	6	1.58
In front of the shop	2	0.53
Vehicles	7	1.84
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As shown in Table 2, the actual and implied smoking behaviour was depicted in 19.47% of the intervals. Most of the smoking references were featured in *KL Gangster*, followed by *Misteri Jalan Lama*, *Ombak Rindu*, *Kongsi*, *Songlap*, and *Kembar Siang*. Although these films were categorized under different genres, however the storyline of *KL Gangster*, *Kongsi* and *Songlap* revolved around crime and vice of the underworld.

Overall, smoking references was depicted more frequently in category PG 13 at an average of 8.21 references per film. This result was mostly contributed by *KL Gangster*, a PG 13 film which accounted for 42 % of the smoking behaviour and paraphernalia imageries in the study. Meanwhile, category 18 contained 6 smoking references while U contained an average of 3.2 smoking references per film. However, if *KL Gangster* was excluded from the sample, the average smoking references per film for PG 13 dropped to 4.76, indicating that amount of smoking references was relatively lower for films that were meant for public consumption such as categories PG 13 and U.

As for smoking paraphernalia, cigarettes were commonly featured at 5.26% of the intervals followed by the ashtray at 3.95% of the intervals. For example, in *Misteri Jalan Lama*, half-smoked cigarette butts and ashtray were depicted various times at a smoke-filled warehouse where Indra gambled with a triad leader. Meanwhile, depiction of other paraphernalia as cigars, pipes, shisha, and electronic cigarettes was minimal, imitating the popularity of tobacco smoking methods in real-life.

Most of the smoking references occurred within the presence of both smokers and non-smokers at 11.32% indicating that smoking is an acceptable and legitimate behaviour in the Malaysian society. In *Ombak Rindu*, the lead actor Harris smoked in the presence of Izzah at home and among partygoers in a club. Meanwhile in *KL Gangster*, smoking was depicted as part of the culture of triads since the leading and supporting characters smoked while attending meetings, negotiating, drinking and even before and after fighting.

About 3.7% of the intervals contained portrayal of characters smoking alone. In *Misteri Jalan Lama*, the scene of inhaling breath and exhaling smoke was used to represent suppression of negative emotion and to reduce the feelings of uneasiness.

Smoking occurred almost equally indoors (13.42 %) and outdoors (13.68%). Most of the smoking scenes were depicted at the streets, alleys and sidewalks at 5.53% and in bars, lounge or clubs at 4.74 % since smoking is permitted in these locations under the Control of Tobacco Product Regulations 2004. Portrayal of smoking at entertainment outlets such as bars, lounge and clubs can be interpreted as art imitating life since a smoking a norm at these locations. Other than that, smoking was frequently depicted at home (3.68%) and the home compound (1.58%) indicating that smoking was accepted by their family members and is a ritualized aspect of their life.

Those who smoked in the films were mostly male characters which possess power, money and status. For example, in *KL Gangster*, the main characters, Malek, Shark, Jai, Ajib, King and Dragon were members of a triad that possess power, charisma, fearlessness and martial arts skills. Meanwhile, in *Ombak Rindu*, the lead character, Harris, was portrayed as a wealthy spoiled brat raised in an elite family who uses power and money to fulfil his wants. Meanwhile, female smokers were negatively portrayed as prostitutes or promiscuous women in *Songlap*, *Kongsi*, and *Aku Bukan Tomboy*.

#### **4.0 Discussion**

Films are originally created to give the viewers sensory pleasure and emotional experience, however the films also release perspectives that imply social values (Benyahia, Gaffney & White, 2009). Although the results indicate that prevalence of smoking imageries is relatively lower among Malaysian films (19.47%) compared to the study by Hazan *et al.* (1994) (36%) and Escamilla *et al.* (2000) (28.4%) on Hollywood films, it still raises concerns about the exposure of Malaysians audience to smoking, especially to the Malay viewers since they are the main consumers of Malay language films. Besides, due to cultural similarities between the symbolic images in films and realities of the Malaysians, the smoking imageries is relevant to many viewers. Certainly, audiences have their own worldviews and may choose to accept or reject these ideological perspectives, however, the prevalence and salience of the smoking imageries is one of the factors that influence observational learning.

Based on social cognitive theory of mass communication, audiences tend to model after behaviours based on their abilities in accomplishing the behaviours themselves (Bandura, 2001). The smoking action is easily replicated since the action cigarettes and other forms of tobacco are accessible to anyone who is aged 18 years and above and the level of complexity for the act of smoking is low.

Furthermore, the tendencies to model after specific behaviours increases if the outcomes of the behaviour are valued and rewarded (Bandura, 2001). In the context of symbolic representations of smoking in Malaysian films, the positive portrayal of smoking such as the acceptance of smoking as a socially acceptable behaviour, a common ritualized habit and an avenue for the release of negative emotion provides motivation for the viewers to smoke. This finding echoed previous results in Hollywoods films (Ryan & Hoerner, 2004; Stockwell & Glantz, 1997; Goldstein *et al.*, 1999). On the contrary, audiences are discouraged from pursuing behaviours that result in adverse consequences. However, the negative consequences of smoking such as a look of disgust and complaints on the hazards of smoking were uncommon in the Malaysian films; hence provide minimal opposing negative outcome to the viewer. Despite these findings, the effect of the smoking imageries also depends on a comparison between the observed behavior and personal experiences of each viewer.

Another determinant of observational learning proposed by Bandura is attractiveness. In the case of *KL Gangster*, the lead character was portrayed as a macho figure that was attractive and capable at the same time. However, this lead character was constantly smoking and these scenes were very natural and gave a very masculine, stylish outlook to the character. Besides, previous studies have shown a correlation between on screen tobacco consumption and smoking behaviour among fans of the movie stars (Tickle *et al.*, 2001; Distefan *et al.*, 2004). Hence, the young and gullible fans of Aaron Aziz, the lead actor of the top two highest grossing films in 2011, *KL Gangster* and *Ombak Rindu*, might be influenced into smoking since viewers tend to emulate models who are attractive, desirable, good looking and powerful (Stern, 2005). In both films, Aaron was portrayed as a habitual smoker who had power and status. As a popular actor who won the *Bintang Paling Popular Anugerah Bintang Popular Berita Harian 2011* as reported by Abdullah (2011), his portrayal of smoking in films exemplified and served as an advocator to smoking behaviours. Nevertheless, it is imperative to note that attention to these attractive symbols of smoking alone is not the only factor contributing to the adoption of smoking behaviors. "People cannot be much influenced by observed events if they do not remember them" (Bandura, 2001, p. 272). Hence, other functions, namely retention, production and motivation may also influence behaviour adoption, indicating a deeper need for further research to consider these areas.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

Findings in this study show the high prevalence of smoking references in top grossing U-rated and PG-13 Malaysian films. As Bandura (2001) clearly explains via the social cognitive theory of mass communication, symbolic representation of the film media is one of the environmental determinants that could influences modelling of behaviours, these findings can potentially provide a ground for understanding the increase of smoking behaviour among Malaysian.

As a party to WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control on September 16, 2005 (World Health Organisation, 2011) the Malaysian government could expand the current regulations on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship to the film media. Otherwise, a code of ethics on substance abuse could be formulated to ensure film-makers

practise self-regulation on the depiction of smoking imageries since their representations in films is one of the determinants that influence actual smoking behaviours.

This study is limited to analysis on the representation of smoking references in films however, based on social cognitive theory of mass media, there are various determinants that influences observational learning, hence the study should be expanded to include other determinants to identify the relationships of these variables on between smoking references on screen with the actual smoking rate among Malaysians.

Future studies on the portrayal of smoking imageries should include other categories such as relevance of smoking imagery to story development, role, actors and the age of the characters. Besides, for a more accurate analysis on the length of smoking references in the films, a continuous display of smoking imageries should be timed.

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