

Tobacco Advertisement and Promotion during COVID-19

Tobacco is a harmful herb for public health and environment. Currently the world is struggling to emerge as victorious against corona virus. COVID-19 has a direct relation with tobacco consumption as smokers have 14 times higher risk of getting infected by corona virus. Unfortunately, the production, advertisement and sale of tobacco have not stopped even in such a tough time. Tobacco industries are exploiting some decade old laws and policies to continue their works.

Objective of the research:

1. Identify TII specifically through advertisement and promotion during COVID-19, observe current situation and formulate recommendation to quicken law implementation
2. Understanding the behavioral change of smokers/tobacco consumers during COVID-19

Methodology, Location and Timeframe:

A google form was developed to conduct a quick survey to conduct the research. Respondents were both non-smokers and smokers/tobacco consumers and samples were randomly selected. The survey was conducted in 21 zillas and 29 upazillas of 08 divisions in Bangladesh during June-August 2020.

Results:

Age, occupation and rate of smoking/tobacco consumption among respondents:

- 61.7% respondents are from age group of 15-25 and 38.3% are from 25-35.
- 61.7% are service holder and 38.3% are students.
- 67.5% consumes cigarette, 3.3% consumes bidi, 1.7% consumes smokeless tobacco and 26.7% are non-user of tobacco.

Tobacco Industries' advertisement and promotional activities during COVID-19:

Respondents have observed advertisement of tobacco products in various means, such as 77.6% have seen advertisement in point of sales, 23.3% in social media, 3.4% via mobile phone and 25% have seen representatives are advertising tobacco products in different strategies (t-shirt, cap, van etc). 9.5% respondents did not observe any kind of advertisement during the research.

Strategies and types of advertisement and promotion:

Tobacco industries mostly target point of sales for their promotional work. In these points of sale stickers (69.3%), posters (28.9%), brand-colored showcase/cashbox (35.1%) and empty cigarette box (51.8%) were seen for advertising purpose.

31.2% respondents said that they received call from tobacco industries. 41.6% were asked about their regular brands and number of cigarette they daily consume, 18.2% were asked about their previous brand and 14.3% got information about new brands. Interestingly, 26% respondents said that, they got information about price hike of cigarettes post national budget declaration.

Tobacco industry and cigarettes/bidi brand with maximum advertise during COVID-19

Following are the brands of British American Tobacco companies that had maximum number of advertisements during COVID-19- Goldleaf (47.9%), Benson and Hedges (40.5%), Derby (40.5%) and Star (34.7%). In addition, advertisement of Japan Tobacco's Sekh Cigarette (18.2%), Dhaka Tobacco's Navy (28.9%) BATB's Hollywood (13.2%), Philip Morris Company's Marlboro (8.3%) were seen.

Among bidi, maximum number of advertisement was of Akij Bidi's (25.6%). Besides, there were advertisement of Ajij bidi (4.6%) and Karigor bidi (0.9%). Hakimpuri Jarda's (6.6%) advertisement was the maximum among jardas along with Baba Jarda (4.1%) and Shova Jarda (5%).

Misleading information by Tobacco Industries:

According to research smokers/tobacco users have 14 times higher risk of getting infected by corona virus. Our survey found that, 51% knew that smokers have lesser risk, 36% knew that corona virus's vaccine has been invented from tobacco leaf and 13% said that they know tobacco as essential good. When asked about the source of information, 81.6% replied social media, 17.1% said newspaper and 5.3% said television.

Smoking/consumption of tobacco and risk of COVID-19:

85% of the respondents were aware of the fact that smokers are at higher risk of COVID-19 and 15% replied they are not aware of it. Considering health, money and risk of COVID-19, 77.7% people replies that they are eager to quit smoking and 22.3% said they do not want to quit smoking.

Limitation:

Limitation of movement was one of the major challenges conducting the survey as it hindered field study. In addition, due to lack of budget we could not conduct the research covering broader aspects. We hope this paper will help the relevant authorities to conduct a detailed research.

Recommendations

- Tobacco industries violating tobacco control law needs to be brought under strict punishment including prison and penalty;
- Regularly organize zila/upzila tobacco control taskforce meeting and implement decisions of the meetings;
- extended awareness campaign by zila/upazila administrations on tobacco and corona virus;
- amend decade old ‘Essential Commodity Act 1956’ and eliminate tobacco from list of essential goods;
- monitoring tobacco control law implementation activities including local anti-tobacco organizations.