

Viewpoint

European governments should stop subsidizing films with tobacco imagery

The European Commission has recently completed a public consultation on the future provision of state aid for audiovisual works. Although not its main aim, the consultation provided an important opportunity to challenge the way that EU governments currently subsidize US and domestic films with tobacco imagery. Given the growing evidence, initially from the USA but now from seven European countries, of a causal link between exposure to tobacco imagery in films and smoking initiation among youth, recently brought together in updated WHO guidance,¹ we call on EU governments to end their subsidies that now amount to €263 million over 2008–11 for films with tobacco imagery.

Exposure to on-screen smoking recruits new adolescent smokers

More than two dozen observational and experimental studies on four continents have established that exposure to on-screen smoking is strongly associated with adolescents starting to smoke and progressing to regular, addicted smoking.¹ Of most direct relevance to the EU, a 2011 cross-sectional study investigated whether this relationship holds across diverse European cultural contexts using more than 16 551 students (mean age, 13 years) in Germany, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Scotland.² After adjusting for other factors affecting adolescent tobacco use, including age and peer smoking behaviour, adolescents in the top quartile of on-screen smoking exposure were 1.7 times (95% CI 1.4–2.0) more likely to have ever smoked than those adolescents in the bottom quartile. These findings are consistent with those from two recent studies conducted in England and Scotland.^{3,4}

Policy responses to on-screen smoking

Article 13 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control commits parties to the Convention, including the EU, to banning tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship. In 2009, the WHO recommended that films made in future with tobacco content be assigned an ‘adult’ (e.g. ‘18’) rating, ‘with the possible exception of movies that reflect the dangers and consequences of tobacco use or depict smoking by an actual historical figure who smoked’.¹ However, no government or film classification body has yet implemented this adult rating.

Government subsidies to films with tobacco imagery

Many European Union governments go even further than tolerating rating systems that certify films with tobacco use as appropriate for children by funding the promotion of smoking to youth through generous subsidies to the movie industries. Government support (‘State aid’) for film and television production currently makes no distinction between projects whose tobacco content plays an important role in recruiting adolescents to smoke and those that do not.

A recent study of public policy towards on-screen smoking estimated that, in the UK from 2003 to 2009, £338 million (€387 million) in Film Tax Credits were routed to British productions of US-developed ‘British’ films with tobacco imagery, almost

all age-classified for adolescents and children.⁵ The same estimation method applied to the sample of all 488 top-grossing films released January 2008–June 2011 yields these results for members of the European Union:

- European Union Member States were the primary production location for 13% (60/488) of these top-grossing films.
- Sixty-three percent (38/60) of top-grossing films shot in EU countries included tobacco.
- EU countries accounted for € 433 million (21% of global total) in public subsidies of top-grossing films released over the 42-month period sampled.
- Among the EU countries, 61% (€ 263 million / € 433 million) of public subsidies for top-grossing films went to films with tobacco (Table 1).
- Within the EU, the UK provided nearly half of subsidies for top-grossing films with tobacco imagery. Germany provided about one-quarter with the remainder provided by Italy (9%), the Czech Republic (7%), France (6%) and Hungary (5%).

In recent years, six of the ten countries awarding the largest amount of public subsidies to top-grossing movies with tobacco imagery were in the European Union. They contributed 26% of all such subsidies.

New policy recommendations

New policy guidance from the WHO states that government subsidy programmes ‘should be amended to make film and television projects with tobacco imagery or reference ineligible for public subsidy’.² It notes that ‘Public subsidy of media productions known to promote youth smoking initiation is counter to WHO FCTC Article 13 and its guidelines. Public support for and policies favouring media producers, whether the rationale is cultural conservation or commercial competition, should be harmonized with the fundamental public health imperative to protect populations from tobacco promotion and with Article 13 of the WHO FCTC.’

Implementing the WHO recommendations would not prevent filmmakers from including tobacco imagery in a film. Nor would it force a filmmaker to adopt an anti-tobacco message. It would

Table 1 Global Share: Public subsidies for top-grossing movies with tobacco, 2008–11

Country	Percent of global total (€ 1.02 billion)	Public subsidy (estimated)
USA	58	€ 595 million
UK	12	€ 127 million
Canada	10	€ 96 million
Germany	6	€ 63 million
New Zealand	4	€ 39 million
Australia	3	€ 26 million
Italy	2	€ 25 million
Czech Republic	2	€ 19 million
France	2	€ 16 million
Hungary	1	€ 14 million

simply bring public subsidies designed to encourage private endeavours deemed in the public interest into harmony with public health policies that EU Member States have committed to as parties to the FCTC. We urge the European Commission to act on the strong and growing scientific evidence linking tobacco imagery in films and smoking initiation among European youth and the new WHO recommendations by making audiovisual works with tobacco imagery ineligible for state subsidies.

Conflicts of interest: None declared.

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