Chilean news media coverage of proposed regulations on tobacco use in national entertainment media, May 2011–February 2013

Across the Americas, Chile has the highest prevalence of adult and youth smoking (40.6% and 39.2%, respectively).1,2 The WHO’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control recommends prohibiting direct and indirect tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship (TAPS), including portrayals of tobacco in films.3 The tobacco industry has long used films to promote its products.3,4 Evidence from numerous countries consistently demonstrates that exposure to tobacco use in films promotes youth smoking, which provides the rationale for policy development in this area.3,4

In May 2011, Chile introduced legislation to ban smoking in enclosed public spaces. From May 2011 to January 2013, Chilean lawmakers discussed amending this legislation to include a ban of all forms of indirect TAPS. The tobacco and entertainment industries lobbied against this legislation, and the TAPS provisions were weakened when they passed in January 2013. Only partial TAPS restrictions were adopted, which included prohibition of paid tobacco product placement.

The media can influence policy decisions.5 Prior studies have examined how media represent tobacco control policies, particularly smoke-free policies6 and taxes.7 However, the specific arguments that media present around TAPS policies have not been systematically studied. To address this research gap, this study analyses how Chilean news media framed the proposed prohibition on tobacco use in Chilean entertainment media.

METHODS

Articles were obtained from the four Chilean print and online news outlets with the highest circulation.8 The news web page of the most listened-to radio station in Chile was also included. Searches using each outlet’s online search function included the terms ‘tobacco’ or ‘anti-tobacco’ alone and in combination with the terms ‘ban’, ‘law’, and ‘advertising’. Stories published between 1 May 2011 and 28 February 2013 were eligible for inclusion. After excluding articles that did not cover regulation of tobacco in entertainment media, 39 articles were analysed.

Figure 1 Frequency of key arguments in favor of and against legislation to ban tobacco use in entertainment media, Chilean news media 2011–2013. WHO FCTC, WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.
A single coder coded the articles using a coding scheme to indicate presence or absence of common arguments made for and against regulation, based on tobacco advocacy documents and previous studies. The article’s overall stance toward the proposed TAPS ban (ie, support, against or mixed) was also assessed.

RESULTS

Overall, 16 articles (41%) supported the ban, 4 articles (10%) were against it, and 19 articles (49%) were mixed. The most frequently voiced argument was how tobacco imagery in media promotes smoking (38%), followed by the need to stop tobacco industry influences on entertainment media (19%) (see figure 1). The most frequent argument against regulation concerned constitutional rights and creative freedom (55%), followed by concerns about how to enforce the law (12%).

DISCUSSION

The results suggest that the media were more supportive (41%) than unsupportive (10%) of the indirect TAPS ban. Nevertheless, this positive media coverage of the proposed regulation was not influential enough to impact its outcome, perhaps due to the relatively low volume of coverage. Although few articles were completely against the TAPS ban, both these and the mixed articles, which were half of those analysed (49%), frequently presented the argument that regulating entertainment media would impinge on artistic freedom and rights. The entertainment industry was the most vocal with this argument, and their lobbying efforts likely contributed to the weakening of the legislation. To advance policy in this area, it may be necessary to find policies that circumvent arguments around artistic freedoms and rights. For example, rather than a complete ban of tobacco imagery, policy efforts could follow WHO recommendations to prohibit brand imagery and industry payoffs, while assigning adult-ratings to films with tobacco to encourage producers to minimise smoking in movies, except when tobacco is necessary for historical accuracy.

The most prevalent argument in support of the TAPS ban was on the connection between entertainment media smoking and youth smoking, suggesting this argument is newsworthy. Nevertheless, this argument only appeared in 38% of the articles; given that no evidence was presented on this connection, building local evidence on this relationship may strengthen its influence and augment its presence, as local data attract media attention.

This study has several limitations, including the inability to determine whether media coverage influenced the law's outcome. Although we analysed the online presence of traditional media, future research should consider social media which is increasingly important in advocacy efforts. Also, only one coder was used due to the small number of articles, so inter-rater reliability cannot be determined. However, the codes were developed and agreed on by a team of researchers and were based on prior studies.

CONCLUSION

Media coverage generally supported the ban on tobacco use in entertainment media, although these provisions were ultimately weakened. Future policy initiatives in this area may benefit from local data showing the extent of entertainment media influences on youth smoking, while more effectively reframing arguments around artistic freedoms.

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