The role of religion and religious leadership in influencing quitting behaviour among Buddhist Thai and Muslim Malaysian adult smokers

Hua-Hie Yong, Ron Borland,
The Cancer Council Victoria, Australia
Rahmat Awang, Maizurah Omar,
National Poison Centre, Malaysia
Buppha Sirirassamee, Stephen Hamann
Mahidol University, Thailand

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In many parts of Asia, religion is central to the lives of its people and provides guidance for how they should behave including whether to smoke.

However, very few research on how religion influences smoking behaviour has been conducted in this region.

Our interest was in the degree to which religion and religious institution influence smoking beliefs and practices, and contribute to quitting among Muslim Malaysian and Thai Buddhist smokers.

Both countries have had recent religious campaigns against smoking.
Religious campaign against smoking

In Malaysia, where Islam is the national religion, the Malaysian government in 2004 initiated a yearly nationwide anti-smoking campaign during the fasting month of Ramadan to encourage Muslims to quit smoking.

In Thailand, monks and abbots have initiated several campaigns in their communities to encourage smokers to quit and to refrain from giving cigarettes as alms.
Norms against smoking: secular vs religious

- According to social psychological theories, normative beliefs are one of the key influences on people’s behaviour.

- Both secular and religious norms can have an influence on smoking.

- Secular/societal norms about smoking are more depersonalised and relate to the perception a person has of what the society in which they live in believes about smoking.

- Religious norms are more personal, tend to be embedded within the social network to which a person belongs, and relate to the perception of what the religion or religious authority a person identifies with believes about smoking.
Normative beliefs & quitting behaviour

- Past research has shown that both societal and religious norms influence smoking behaviour (Van den Putte et al, 2005; Hosking et al, 2009).
- As smoking becomes increasingly denormalized, societal norms against smoking increases too, resulting in increased quitting activity.
- In countries like Malaysia and Thailand where religion is central to people’s lives, religious norms against smoking are also increasing following anti-smoking activities initiated by religious authorities in those countries.
Malaysia, being a tobacco friendly country until more recently, has a weak societal norm against smoking. Thus, would expect religious norms on smoking to have a strong influence on how Muslim Malaysians should behave.

By contrast, Thailand has had strong tobacco control for a long time. Thus, would expect a strong effect of societal norms against smoking.
Study Aim

• This paper prospectively examined the religious factors and normative beliefs associated with quitting activity among Buddhist Thai smokers and Muslim Malaysian smokers.
Methods

• Data for this study came from the first three waves of the ITC-SEA project, a cohort survey study of broadly representative national samples of adult smokers from two Southeast Asian countries – Thailand and Malaysia.

• In each country, about 2,000 adult smokers were recruited using mainly face-to-face household interviews.
Household face-to-face interviews
Religiosity – “In your day-to-day life, how often do you refer to or use your religious beliefs and values to guide your actions?” (Never, Almost never, Sometimes, All the time)

 Quitting advice from religious leaders – “Have you been told (in a sermon) by a religious leader that you should try to quit smoking?”

 Motivation from religious leaders to quit – “How motivated, if at all, would you be to quit smoking if your religious leader advised you that you should quit?”
Predictor variables:
Normative beliefs against smoking

- Religious norms on smoking - “As far as you know, does your religion discourage smoking?” (Yes/No/DK)
- Societal norms on smoking – “Thai/Malaysian society disapproves of smoking” (Agree – Disagree)
Outcome variables: Quitting activity

- Quit attempts – “Since we last talked to you in [year of last survey], have you made any attempts to quit?” Yes/No
- Quit success among those who made a quit attempt – “Are you back smoking or are you still stopped?”
Percentage who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement:
Your religion discourages smoking
Your society disapproves of smoking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious group</th>
<th>Society disapproves of smoking</th>
<th>Religion discourages smoking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malaysian Muslims</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai Buddhists</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Religious group:
- Malaysian Muslims
- Thai Buddhists
Percentage who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: Your religion discourages smoking

Majority of both groups agreed that their religion discourages smoking but significantly more Thai Buddhists than Malaysian Muslims who did so.
Percentage who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: Thai/Malaysian society disapproves of smoking

![Bar chart showing comparison between Malaysian Muslims and Thai Buddhists on the percentage agreeing with the statement.]

- Malaysian Muslims: High percentage agreeing.
- Thai Buddhists: Varying percentage agreeing.

Legend:
- Society disapproves of smoking
- Religion discourages smoking

Statistical significance: p < .001

Religious group images:
- Malaysian Muslims
- Thai Buddhists

International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project (ITC) logo
Percentage who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: **Thai/Malaysian society disapproves of smoking**

Significantly greater percentage of Thai Buddhists than Malaysian Muslims who endorsed the belief that their society disapproves of smoking.
Smokers’ perception of their religious leaders’ role in smoking cessation

Religious leader said to quit

Religious leader would motivate quitting “a lot”
Malaysian Muslims: Baseline factors predicting making a quit attempt at follow-up

- Society disapproves of smoking: $\text{OR}=1.22\text{ns}$
- Religion discourages smoking: $\text{OR}=1.54^{**}$
- Leaders said to quit: $\text{OR}=0.82\text{ns}$
- Leaders would motivate quit: $\text{OR}=0.94\text{ns}$

NB: OR adjusted for socio-demog, religiosity and other religious factors; ** p<.01
Thai Buddhists: Baseline factors predicting making a quit attempt at follow-up

- Society disapproves of smoking: OR=1.34**
- Religion discourages smoking: OR=1.15ns
- Leaders said to quit: OR=1.20ns
- Leaders would motivate quit: OR=1.94***

NB: OR adjusted for socio-demog, religiosity and other religious factors.
Conclusions (1)

• Findings from this study indicate that in countries like Malaysia and Thailand where religion plays a prominent role in society, religion can play an important role as part of an integrated set of programs and policies for tobacco control.
• Religious authorities, as credible change agents, can help in facilitating the social and cultural denormalization of smoking, and in motivating smokers to quit.
Conclusions (2)

• Data also demonstrate that, in the absence of strong societal views against smoking, Muslim smokers in Malaysia appear to look to their religion for guidance on whether they should quit smoking or not.

• By contrast, the presence of strong tobacco control efforts in Thailand where religious and secular views on smoking are very similar, Buddhist smokers appear to be primarily influenced to quit smoking by the views on smoking held by their society.

• These findings suggest that in country where religion is central to people’s lives, but where tobacco control efforts are weak, religious views on smoking seem to play a more central role than societal views in prompting smokers to quit.

• As tobacco control progresses, societal views on smoking may become the main driver of quitting behaviour.
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