

Graphic Health Warning on Cigarette Packs through the Lens of Young Adult Smokers: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract. This research study aimed to explore the lived experiences of young adult cigarette smokers as they saw graphic health warning images on cigarette packets. Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological approach was employed to gain deeper insights into understanding the experiences of the chosen demographic. The study was conducted within the ten most populous villages, also known as barangays, in Tuguegarao City, Cagayan, Philippines, utilizing a purposive sampling technique with consideration for the "data saturation" principle. A semi-structured interview guide prepared in Filipino, English, Ybanag, Ytawes, and Ilocano was used as the research instrument. Through these interviews, involving 15 participants, four overarching themes emerged and were meticulously structured: smoking as a means of stress relief for the smokers, negative emotional responses are evoked by the graphic health warnings on cigarette packs, the graphic health warnings showcase the adverse effects of smoking, and difficulties of young adult smokers towards smoking cessation. The findings emphasized the complex factors that influence the smoking behavior of young adults and the challenges of quitting, especially due to the role of smoking as a stress relief mechanism. While graphic health warnings can raise awareness and elicit adverse emotional reactions among young adults, they may not be sufficient to promote cessation. Hence, combining this strategy with stress relief or effective coping interventions may be needed to improve cessation success for this age group.

Keywords: Young adult smokers; Graphic health warnings; Cigarette packets; Experiences.

1.0 Introduction

Cigarette smoking has detrimental effects on almost every part of the body, leading to various diseases and overall compromising the well-being of individuals who smoke (CDC, 2024). The global tobacco crisis stands as a significant menace to public health, ranking among the most formidable challenges in history. Annually, the global tobacco crisis claims the lives of over 8 million individuals worldwide (Tobacco, 2023). Moreover, approximately one in five Filipino adults, totaling 15.1 million individuals aged 15 years and above, are presently using tobacco (Marshall et al., 2024). Young adulthood, from 18 to 25 years, is a distinct development phase marked by crucial tasks facilitating self-discovery and identity shaping. Moreover, a current smoker is an adult who has smoked a total of 100 cigarettes throughout their life and is presently engaged in smoking. Since 1991, this category has been further categorized into "everyday" smokers, indicating those who smoke daily (CDC, 2024).

The Graphic Health Warnings Law, also known as Republic Act (RA) No. 10643 in the Philippines, defined GHWs as "photographic images or graphic health warnings printed on the tobacco product package that accurately depict the hazards of tobacco use and were accompanied by textual warnings related to the picture." The law, which was signed in 2014 and implemented in 2016, introduced the current GHWs on tobacco products. The designs were updated every two years. However, studies suggested that GHWs prompted individuals to consider ceasing smoking, while others claimed that they did not. The state of relevant pieces of evidence to date presents that gaps in knowledge about the problem still exist. Studies suggest that there still needs to be more evidence on policies about tobacco cessation initiatives. Furthermore, they explain that smoking behavior, like that of young adults, also depends on the type of graphics in the packaging; hence, not all smokers are affected by the graphics that they see (Chudech & Janmaimool, 2021; Francis et al., 2019). Relevantly, individuals like young adult smokers have difficulty interpreting the warning labels, and even though they develop the correct interpretation after quite some time, these graphic labels lose effect over time of their intended purpose in encouraging smokers to quit (Drovandi et al., 2019; Perez et al., 2023).

On the other hand, pieces of evidence show that the use of graphics is effective in decreasing the number of cigarettes smoked per day while increasing the intent to quit smoking (Brewer et al., 2016; Joo et al., 2022; Jung, 2016; Moodie et al., 2017). However, even though the latter literature shows that the graphics are compelling, there is still no evidence that these individuals quit smoking. Their evidence only suggests limiting oneself and having an intent, distinguishing between stopping or quitting. Another gap among the existing latter literature is that only one of them used a qualitative research design (Moodie et al., 2017). Almost all relevant literature is quantitative, and some recommend delving deeper into the problem by having a more naturalistic, in-depth exploration. Thus, this study utilized a phenomenological approach to thoroughly investigate participants' subjective experiences and viewpoints, providing insights into the components and aspects of the smoking habit (Yari et al., 2022).

In addition to the presented general gaps, in the local setting, there is no existing data on the explicit number of young adults who are cigarette smokers. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that in the absence of rigorous research or pieces of evidence, including local statistics, one of the sources of identifying a problem is observations. As such, daily or frequent encounters with young adult smokers gave justification for conducting an objective scientific exploration. There are still contradictions in the results/pieces of evidence of existing literature, and there is a need for more qualitative evidence on the area of concern and local evidence on the specific problem identified. Hence, this study was conceptualized to describe the lived experiences of young adult cigarette smokers in the northern part of the Philippines on the graphic health warnings/ images they encounter on cigarette packs.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This research study employed Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological approach (Morrow et al., 2015) to explore the lived experiences of young adult smokers toward graphic health warnings to gain deeper insights into understanding subjective perceptions and interpretations. This approach enabled the researchers to better understand the universal nature of the phenomenon under study through an in-depth examination of participants' feelings, perceptions, and beliefs and an exploration of the views of those who had seen graphic health warnings in cigarette packets.

2.2 Research Locale

The research study was undertaken within the top 10 most populated barangays in Tuguegarao City, Cagayan, Philippines. This is a component city and the capital of the province of Cagayan.

2.3 Research Participants

A total of 15 young adult smokers aged 21 to 25 years were included in the study. Since the design was qualitative, no pre-identified number of participants was involved. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants aged 18 to 25 years, permanent residents of the identified barangays, who smoked cigarettes daily, often consuming at least one pack (20 cigarettes) per day, and who had seen and encountered graphic warning labels on cigarette packets. The majority of the young adult smokers included in the study are males (87%) and

have been smoking for less than 6 years (66%). Furthermore, the data saturation principle was considered regarding the number of participants. Data saturation occurred when the participants' answers were the same, at about the 11th participant, and no new information was being gathered. Once information saturation occurred, the researchers stopped the data-gathering procedure and started with the analysis.

2.4 Research Instrument

A researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide was used during data collection. This allowed the researchers to ask follow-up questions as needed. Face validation was done with the instrument submitted for evaluation to three professional nurses to check the validity and understandability of the questions included. Notably, the researchers prepared the final version of the interview guide in Filipino, English, Ybanag, Ytawes, and Ilocano. Using the language or dialect of each participant helped gather rich information.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers sought the endorsement of the identified barangays before data collection. Moreover, assistance was also sought from the barangay youth leaders to identify the participants of the study. Then, the researchers requested voluntary informed consent from each participant. To be more formal, each participant affixed their signature to the informed consent form. Afterward, each participant was asked about a convenient time and place for the interview session. Before starting the interview session with each participant, additional permission was sought to record the session digitally. Audio recording allowed the researchers and participants to focus more on the interview.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Before starting data collection, the researchers obtained necessary approvals from the university and barangays or local villages. Voluntary and informed participation of the participants was ensured, with a focus on maintaining participant confidentiality and anonymity throughout the process. Participants were allowed to withdraw at any time due to conflict of interest, distress, or failure to provide accurate data and were compensated with snacks rather than financial payment. The researchers took precautions to avoid conflicts of interest and funded the study themselves. Upon completion, all participant data was securely destroyed. The study provided participants with insights into the health risks of smoking, benefited the community by enhancing health education programs, and contributed to societal health through evidence-based recommendations for tobacco control policies. Lastly, the study was reviewed and approved by the University of Saint Louis-Research Ethics Board, with protocol number 006-2024-04, before the implementation of the research protocol.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Through a comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences of young adult smokers regarding the graphic health warnings seen on cigarette packets, essential insights were gleaned from the informants. Employing Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of young adult smokers toward these graphic health warnings aimed to gain deeper insights into understanding subjective perceptions and interpretations. This approach enabled the researchers to better understand the universal nature of the phenomenon under study through an in-depth examination of participants' feelings, perceptions, and beliefs and an exploration of the views of those who had seen graphic health warnings on cigarette packets. Four overarching themes emerged and were meticulously structured to underscore the essence of the gathered information. These themes included (i) cigarette smoking as a means to relax and relieve stress, (ii) pictures on cigarette packs eliciting negative feelings, (iii) pictures on cigarette packs serving as a warning of the adverse effects of smoking, and (iv) difficulties with smoking cessation.

Theme 1: Cigarette Smoking as a means to Relax and Relieve Stress

The theme emerged strongly from the responses of young adult smokers as they described smoking in various ways that highlighted its role as a coping mechanism and stress reliever. The theme captures how these young adults perceive smoking not only as a habitual activity but also as a deliberate strategy to manage stress and achieve emotional relief. According to them, smoking's function is beyond mere addiction and highlights its psychological role in managing daily stressors. Young adult smokers indicated that smoking facilitates relaxation and alleviates their stress. Smoking functioned as their primary coping mechanism in response to stress.

Furthermore, they reported that this stress-relief benefit was a key factor in their initiation of smoking and continued to contribute to their difficulty in quitting. The following were described by them accordingly:

"Smoking for me is probably a way to relieve stress and calm down." (I10)

"For me, it is like, just a thing, a coping mechanism when stressed, you know." (I15)

The young adult smokers discussed that smoking was a means to relax and relieve stress, which served as their primary coping mechanism. They initiated smoking due to its stress-relief benefits, which persistently hindered their efforts to quit. The role of smoking as a stress reliever was widely acknowledged in the literature, with various socio-cultural, economic, and work-related factors influencing its prevalence and persistence among different demographic groups. Young adults, in particular, experienced unique challenges in navigating the transition to independence, which often coincided with heightened vulnerability to stressors and substance use. Biological and psychosocial factors influence young adults, distinct from adolescents and older adults. This period of transition was marked by changes in social and environmental contexts, contributing to increased susceptibility to substance use and psychological distress. Consequently, young adult cigarette use exhibited distinct cohort and historical trends, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of the biobehavioral and environmental determinants shaping smoking behavior in this population (Jebai et al., 2023). Moreover, individuals from low-income backgrounds faced compounded challenges in smoking cessation efforts. Guillaumier et al., (2017) Demonstrated that financial hardship often impeded quit attempts among this demographic, as smoking served as a coping mechanism for stressors associated with socioeconomic status. Despite expressing a desire to quit, smokers from low-income backgrounds exhibited fewer successful quit attempts, underscoring the need for targeted interventions addressing the intersection of financial strain and smoking behavior.

Based on the results of this study, the young adults had mixed reactions to smoking and efforts to help people quit. The community saw smoking as a common issue, especially for stress relief. Public health campaigns and educational programs received different levels of support. Young adults often knew the health risks and wanted to quit, but the immediate stress relief from smoking made it hard for them to stop. While support groups and counseling were helpful, they were not enough on their own to address the deeper stress-related reasons people smoked. Additionally, disparities in smoking prevalence persisted among population groups, particularly among those with lower socioeconomic status and racial/ethnic minority groups (Creamer et al., 2021). Financial strain emerged as a significant barrier to quitting, with smokers experiencing financial difficulties demonstrating lower rates of successful cessation attempts (Avila et al., 2022; Guillaumier et al., 2017). However, successful cessation efforts were shown to alleviate financial stress, suggesting a bidirectional relationship between financial strain and smoking behavior (Alexander et al., 2019). Furthermore, work-related factors were crucial in shaping smoking behavior and cessation outcomes. Liao et al., (2022) reported higher absence rates among smokers and ex-smokers in the workforce, highlighting the broader implications of smoking on productivity and workforce dynamics. Young adult smokers typically displayed specific characteristics that influenced their smoking habits. They often started smoking during periods of high stress or transition, such as moving to college or starting a new job. These individuals frequently cited stress relief as the primary reason for their continued smoking. Young adults were also more likely to experiment with smoking due to social influences and peer pressure. Additionally, they often had a stronger belief in their ability to quit in the future, which could delay serious quit attempts. Financial considerations also played a role, with many young adults using part of their limited income or allowances to buy cigarettes despite acknowledging the financial strain it imposed. They smoked for a variety of reasons tied to their social, financial, and emotional lives. Socially, smoking often helped them connect with friends. Despite usually having tight budgets, they still spent money on cigarettes to relieve stress. Psychologically, they were going through significant changes, like starting new jobs or living on their own, which made them more likely to use smoking to cope. These overlapping factors made it hard for them to quit smoking.

Theme 2: Graphic Health Warnings on Cigarette Packs Eliciting Negative Feelings

Young adult smokers openly discussed their emotional responses to the graphic images prominently displayed on cigarette packs. They described how these visuals evoked intense negative feelings such as fear, disgust, and anxiety. Most young adult smokers reported experiencing negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and disgust when viewing the images on cigarette packs. These feelings were primarily linked to concerns about the potential

adverse effects of smoking depicted in the images. Informants expressed worry that these negative health consequences could happen to them if they continued smoking, particularly fearing illness as they aged. One respondent mentioned that the negative emotions elicited by these images made them consider quitting smoking. However, it was essential to note that while most young adult smokers experienced these adverse reactions, some indicated that the images did not affect them. Their reflections on the psychological impact of these unsettling images are discussed below:

"That is it, I am scared. It is tough when you are in that situation when you have that kind of illness. You are struggling when it is like that." (12)

"Those disturbing pictures made me realize the severe health risks associated with smoking. Of course, they feel disgusted when I see something like that." (19)

Young adult smokers often deal with high stress, social pressure, and a tendency to downplay long-term health risks. They started smoking to manage stress or fit in with friends. Despite having tight budgets, they spent money on cigarettes for quick stress relief, even if it meant ignoring long-term financial and health consequences. Many were in transitional stages, like starting new jobs or living on their own, which added to their stress and reliance on smoking. However, with the proper support and motivation, many young adults were willing to quit smoking. Young adult smokers described experiencing negative emotions, including fear, anxiety, and disgust, upon viewing the images displayed on cigarette packs. These emotional responses were primarily associated with concerns about the depicted adverse effects of smoking. Young adult smokers expressed a sense of worry regarding the possibility of facing similar health consequences if they continued smoking, especially fearing the onset of illness as they aged. However, it was noteworthy that while many young adult smokers reported such reactions, some indicated that the images had no impact on them. These labels often featured graphic images depicting the adverse health consequences of smoking, intending to evoke negative emotions and discourage smoking behavior. This discussion focused on the role of pictures on cigarette packs in eliciting negative feelings among smokers and potential implications for smoking cessation initiatives. Studies have consistently shown that graphic warning labels on cigarette packs evoke negative emotions among smokers. Research indicated that health warnings effectively captured smokers' attention and prompted feelings of unease, fear, repulsion, and worry regarding the adverse outcomes associated with smoking (Perez et al., 2023; Y. Li et al., 2020). Additionally, Smokers were found to have avoided cigarette pack risk messages as they evoked unpleasant emotions (Cho et al., 2018; X. Li et al., 2021; Y. Li et al., 2020). Negative emotional arousal induced by pictorial warning labels was crucial in promoting behavior change and fostering increased attention to warnings (X. Li et al., 2021; (Y. Li et al., 2020).

The locale of the study supported graphic warning labels on cigarette packs, seeing them as effective in discouraging smoking among young adults. Young adults, however, had mixed reactions. Many felt fear, anxiety, and disgust, which made them more aware of smoking's dangers and could have motivated them to quit. However, some young adults said the images did not affect their smoking habits, showing that while these labels worked for some, they were not adequate for everyone. Young adults smoke due to a mix of social, financial, and psychological reasons. Socially, smoking helped them bond with friends. Financially, they often had limited money but still bought cigarettes for stress relief. Psychologically, they were dealing with significant life changes, making them more likely to use smoking as a coping method. These overlapping factors made it hard for young adults to quit smoking. The effectiveness of graphic images in eliciting negative feelings depended on the severity and relevance of the depicted health consequences. Warnings featuring graphic photos of patients suffering from severe diseases such as lung or laryngeal cancer were perceived as the most disturbing. They heightened the perceived risk of smoking-related harms (Chudech & Janmaimool, 2021). Conversely, warnings depicting less severe health consequences were considered less alarming, and emotionally charged warning images were ineffective unless they related explicitly to smoking-related hazards (Shi et al., 2017). Therefore, the relevance and severity of the depicted health consequences influenced the emotional impact of graphic warning labels. Understanding the role of negative emotional responses to graphic warning labels was crucial for designing effective smoking cessation initiatives. Unfavorable attitudes about smoking, elicited by graphic health warning labels, were associated with lower smoking rates, increased interest in stopping, and quit attempts (Evans et al., 2017). Therefore, leveraging negative emotions through graphic warning labels could have contributed to the

success of smoking cessation efforts. However, it was essential to consider individual differences in emotional responses and tailor interventions accordingly (Y. Li et al., 2020). Pictures on cigarette packs played a vital role in eliciting negative feelings among smokers, thereby influencing smoking behavior and cessation efforts. Graphic warning labels that evoked emotional solid responses had the potential to deter smoking initiation and promote quit attempts. Future research should have explored the effectiveness of different graphic images and their impact on smoking-related attitudes and behaviors to inform evidence-based tobacco control policies and interventions.

Theme 3: Pictures on Cigarette Packs Serve as Warning of The Negative Effects of Smoking

Young adult smokers shared their perspectives on how the images on cigarette packs serve as powerful warnings about the adverse effects of smoking. They expressed their opinions and offered advice to their peers and the younger generation. Many emphasized the stark impact of these images, noting that they serve as a constant reminder of the health risks associated with smoking. Most of the young adult smokers highlighted that the images displayed on cigarette packs effectively illustrated the detrimental consequences of smoking. They perceived these images as blatant warnings, urging individuals to either refrain from smoking or to quit altogether. Additionally, informants emphasized that these depictions served as cautionary reminders of the long-term repercussions associated with cigarette smoking. Moreover, they noted that these warnings were mainly directed toward younger individuals, aiming to discourage them from initiating smoking habits. By showcasing the potential health risks and adverse outcomes of smoking, these images served as preventative measures to prevent the younger demographic from starting a habit that could have significant detrimental effects on their health and well-being in the future. They view these warnings as crucial for deterring younger individuals from starting to smoke, stressing the importance of making informed and healthy life decisions.

"Ahmm, what I see in cigarette pictures are its harmful effects on the body and health." (I4)

"Although the pictures were unsettling and bothersome, they served as a reminder of the harmful effects of smoking." (I9)

Young adult smokers are convinced of the effectiveness of the images featured on cigarette packs in vividly portraying the harmful consequences of smoking. They viewed these images as straightforward warnings, compelling individuals to abstain from smoking or quit altogether. Furthermore, participants emphasized that these depictions served as solid reminders of the lasting impacts associated with cigarette smoking. Additionally, young adult smokers pointed out that these warnings were mainly targeted toward younger individuals to dissuade them from initiating smoking habits. By illustrating the potential health risks and adverse outcomes of smoking, these images functioned as preventive measures aimed at discouraging the younger demographic from adopting a habit that could profoundly affect their health and well-being in the future. Visual warnings on cigarette packs, particularly those featuring graphic images depicting the adverse health effects of smoking, played a crucial role in public health efforts to reduce smoking prevalence. Extensive research has demonstrated the effectiveness of such warnings in conveying the risks associated with tobacco use and motivating behavior change among smokers (Cho et al., 2022; Enyame & Nkeigbeng, 2023; Nian et al., 2023). One study focusing on implementing the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), emphasized the importance of large warning labels, preferably with graphic images, to communicate the harms of smoking and the benefits of quitting. This highlighted the significance of incorporating visual elements into warning messages to enhance their impact on smokers (Hammond & O'Connor, 2014).

A similar study, which included both young adult smokers and non-smokers, found that non-smoking participants were more sensitive to scary warning images than smoking participants, indicating that the warnings were more effective in influencing those who had not yet started smoking (Magnan et al., 2022). Warning labels containing graphics and text received higher ratings for enhancing comprehension, imparting additional knowledge, and eliciting increased concern and discouragement among smokers compared to labels containing only text (Magnan et al., 2022). This shows the effectiveness of combining visual and textual elements to convey the risks of smoking and encourage cessation effectively. The reaction of the locale and young adults to the warning graphic labels on cigarette packs was overwhelmingly positive. The images were seen as straightforward warnings that effectively conveyed the harmful consequences of smoking. These warnings influenced young adults in particular and somehow deterred their desire to smoke or gained more knowledge about the dangers of smoking. Furthermore, it highlighted the role of emotional arousal induced by pictorial warning labels (PWLs) in

motivating smokers to contemplate quitting (Y. Li et al., 2020). Their findings suggested that negative emotions triggered by PWLs, such as fear and repulsion, served as mechanisms through which smokers were inspired to consider quitting. This emphasized the importance of evoking strong emotional responses through visual warnings to promote behavior change. However, challenges existed in communicating the message conveyed by visual warnings, particularly among vulnerable population groups. (Guillaumier et al., 2017) found that young people from low-income backgrounds, who often smoked as a coping mechanism for stressors, might face difficulties in deciphering textual warnings about hazardous substances present in cigarettes. This underscored the importance of explicit language and the incorporation of visual components to enhance the effectiveness of warning messages, especially among disadvantaged populations. The themes that emerged from the study were centered around the effectiveness of warning graphic labels in conveying the dangers of smoking. The study found that these warnings were more effective in influencing young adults than text-only warnings, as they evoked more robust emotional responses and were more memorable. The study also highlighted the importance of incorporating visual elements into warning messages, particularly among vulnerable groups such as young people from low-income backgrounds.

Theme 4: Difficulties with Smoking Cessation

Young adult smokers narrated their difficulties with smoking cessation, precisely describing their adversities. Young adult smokers indicated that they persisted in smoking despite experiencing negative emotions when confronted with the images and warnings depicting the side effects of smoking on cigarette packs. Their struggle to quit smoking was closely tied to the primary reason for their smoking behavior, which was to alleviate stress. Additionally, some young adult smokers admitted to being addicted to cigarette smoking, further complicating their efforts to quit. It was noteworthy that one respondent expressed a sense of resignation, stating that nothing could compel or aid them in quitting smoking. They highlighted the addictive nature of smoking, explaining that their bodies crave nicotine, making it extremely challenging to quit.

Yes, especially when I entered college. I tried to quit during senior high, but after a few weeks, I started craving it again. I could not stop, so the habit came back." (15)

"I tried. They prescribed something as a substitute for cigarettes, just a friend's suggestion. Because I was craving cigarettes, right? He told me just to eat candy." (17)

The themes in the context of the young adults revolved around the multifaceted nature of smoking behavior. Critical barriers to quitting included stress management, nicotine dependence, and the psychological and emotional factors associated with smoking. These factors were closely tied to the primary reason for smoking behavior, which was often to alleviate stress. Furthermore, the socio-cultural and economic context, including financial strain and limited access to cessation resources, also played a significant role in smoking cessation efforts. The young adult smokers indicated that they persisted in smoking despite experiencing negative emotions when confronted with the images and warnings depicting the side effects of smoking on cigarette packs. Their struggle to quit smoking was closely tied to the primary reason for their smoking behavior, which was to alleviate stress.

The reaction of the locale and the young adults to smoking cessation interventions was complex and influenced by various factors. Young adults were more likely to make a serious quit attempt than older adults but were less likely to employ evidence-based methods to quit smoking. This highlighted the need for interventions tailored to young adults' unique needs and challenges. Numerous studies have highlighted the role of psychological and emotional factors in smoking cessation. Negative emotions triggered by warnings on cigarette packs, such as fear, anxiety, and disgust, could serve as both motivators and barriers to quitting (Perez et al., 2023). While some individuals might have been prompted to quit due to these emotions, others may have experienced avoidance or denial, hindering their cessation efforts (Cho et al., 2018). Moreover, individual cognitive judgment played a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of warning labels, with emotionally charged images often proving more impactful in promoting behavior change (X. Li et al., 2021; Y. Li et al., 2020). On the other hand, the socio-cultural and economic context also significantly influenced smoking cessation. Young adults from low-income backgrounds may have faced unique challenges, including higher smoking rates, financial strain, and limited access to cessation resources (Guillaumier et al., 2017). Socioeconomic disparities in smoking prevalence persisted despite efforts to reduce overall smoking rates (Creamer et al., 2021). The transition to independence during young

adulthood also introduced new social and environmental factors that may have impacted smoking behavior (Jebai et al., 2023). Consequently, work-related factors could both facilitate and impede smoking cessation efforts. Smokers and ex-smokers may have experienced higher absenteeism rates, affecting productivity and workforce participation (Liao et al., 2022). Workplace smoking cessation programs and policies could have been crucial in supporting cessation attempts and promoting smoke-free environments (Levy et al., 2019). These young adults often face unique challenges such as financial strain, limited access to cessation resources, and the need to balance smoking with other aspects of their lives, such as work and social relationships. The context of the young adults was critical in understanding their smoking behavior and the barriers to quitting. Young adulthood was a period of significant transition, marked by the onset of independence, increased financial responsibilities, and the need to establish a career. This could have led to increased stress levels, which were often managed through smoking. Additionally, young adults might have been more likely to engage in social smoking, which could have made it difficult for them to identify as smokers and thus experience little pressure to quit. Moreover, Financial strain often served as a significant barrier to successful smoking cessation. Smokers facing financial difficulties may have expressed a desire to quit but struggled to make quit attempts due to limited resources and coping mechanisms (Avila et al., 2022). Despite making more quit attempts, financially strained smokers may have been less successful in quitting compared to their counterparts (Guillaumier et al., 2017). To address the difficulties associated with smoking cessation, comprehensive and tailored interventions were needed. These interventions should have considered the multifaceted nature of smoking behavior and addressed psychological, socio-cultural, economic, and environmental factors. Implementing evidence-based cessation strategies, such as increasing access to affordable cessation resources, promoting smoke-free environments, and addressing social determinants of health, could have enhanced the effectiveness of smoking cessation initiatives (Azagba et al., 2020; Catalano & Gilleskie, 2021).

4.0 Conclusion

It can be concluded from the experiences of young adult smokers the complexity of factors that can influence the smoking habit and desire towards smoking cessation. The results emphasize the role of smoking as a stress-relief mechanism and the challenges of quitting due to addiction and socio-economic factors. Young adult smokers rely on cigarettes as a coping strategy for stress, which complicates cessation efforts despite awareness of the health risks, as illustrated by graphic health warnings on cigarette packs. These warnings elicit adverse emotional reactions such as fear, anxiety, and disgust, which in some cases prompt reflection on the harms of smoking but do not always lead to successful quit attempts. While graphic images effectively raise awareness and discourage smoking initiation, their impact on current smokers is mixed, as some individuals continue despite the emotional responses triggered. Due to the influence of various factors that affect the smoking behavior of young adults, the use of graphic health warnings- while they may elicit the intended response- may not be an effective smoking cessation strategy on its own. Combining this strategy with interventions focused on stress relief or better coping mechanisms for stress may be necessary to address the root causes of smoking and improve the chances for successful cessation. These findings are limited to a specific cohort of young adult smokers within the identified locale. Consequently, the results may not be broadly generalizable to other populations or settings. Future research could benefit from a quantitative approach or a comparable qualitative investigation to further explore and contextualize the experiences of young adult smokers in diverse localities.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

All – editing, writing; JAMG, SGRA, ZMEA, ANBB, AMMC-data collection and processing; SKSE, JPS, JAMG-supervising; JPS, JAMG – data analysis; SKSE, JPS-finalization of paper for publication.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The authors do not have any conflict of interest in the conduct of this research.

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