Reviewer's report

Title: Responses to textual and pictorial cigarette pack health warnings: Findings from an exploratory cross-sectional survey study in Austria

Version: 0 Date: 04 Feb 2018

Reviewer: Elif Çalikoğlu

Reviewer's report:

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Reviewer's Comments to manuscript

This valuable paper fills an important knowledge gap in the response data for Austria after the 2016 implementation of the new CPHWs; therefore it constitutes the first study exploring and analyzing Austrian smokers' and ex-smokers' responses to the newly implemented policy. The main objective of this study was to explore smokers' responses to both textual and pictorial CPHWs and to analyze how these responses were related to intentions to quit smoking. The study findings suggest a weaker impact of the health warnings on smokers who doubted the validity of the warnings and the risks of smoking. The authors make the bold and thought-provoking statement that "Displaying the CPHWs - whether textual or pictorial - is probably not enough to overcome smokers' denial and, eventually motivate them to consider a change in smoking behavior".

Methods Section

The study dependent variables are excellent, the scales show good internal consistency (Cronbach's = 0.86), and the questionnaire probes not only for cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to the CPHWs, but also for factors that may limit the level of impact of the CPHWs. However, it is not clear how the questions are anchored in a theoretical framing; this should be made more explicit to the reader (i.e. communication and psychological theory; theory of change; previous tobacco warnings theory and research; etc).
Discussion Section

It would benefit this section to draw more on a 2015 meta-analysis of 37 studies with data on 48 independent samples (N=33,613), which provides support for the notion that pictorial warnings elicit changes in an array of psychosocial constructs that are plausible mediators of the warning-behavior link. The potential mediator most proximal to behavior is intentions, one of the strongest predictors of behavior according to both theory and empirical research. This meta-analysis, Noar SM, Hall MG, Francis DB, Ribisl KM, Pepper JK, Brewer NT. Pictorial cigarette pack warnings: A327 meta-analysis of experimental studies. Tob Control. 2016;25(3):341-354, is in fact referenced by the authors of this study (Ref.#9).

Conclusions Section

The authors recommend:

"The main challenges for public health policies will thus be to increase the salience of health warnings in order to enhance the cognitive processing of smoking-related information and to overcome smokers' denial of the well-publicised ill-effects of tobacco use".

The evidence from the international body of literature supports pictorial cigarette pack warnings as more effective than text-only warnings. Gaps in the literature include a lack of assessment of smoking behavior and a paucity of research on how exactly warnings exert their effects. However well connected to the finding that weaker impact of the health warnings on smokers who doubted the validity of the warnings and the risks of smoking have been substantially less impacted by CPHWs, the authors' recommendation "to enhance the cognitive processing" is a too vague. I suggest to articulate a more focused rational by pointing out that future studies should identify constructs that mediate pictorial warnings' effects on smoking behavior. Lastly but not in the least, the recommendations might also point out that given the fact that smoking is not only an individual, but also a social behavior, future research should seek a better understanding of how social interactions and policies aiming to change the social climate of smoking, might enhance CPHWs effectiveness.
Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Does the work include the necessary controls?
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Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
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