



## Exploration of Subjective Experiences Regarding Tobacco Control Policies in Communities with Varied Socio-Economic Backgrounds

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### ABSTRACT

Tobacco control policies are an important part of public health aimed at reducing the prevalence of smoking and its negative health impacts. Although various policies have been implemented, understanding individuals' subjective experiences of these policies remains limited, particularly in diverse social and cultural contexts. This study aims to explore the subjective experiences of communities regarding tobacco control policies and to examine the challenges faced by individuals in adhering to these policies. Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, this research highlights how socio-economic and cultural factors influence individuals' perceptions and experiences of tobacco control policies. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 15 participants and analyzed using thematic analysis. The main findings reveal that individuals from low income groups feel burdened by the policy, while those from higher-income groups are better able to access healthier tobacco alternatives. This study provides valuable insight into the need for policies that are more sensitive to socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in order to enhance the effectiveness of tobacco control. The findings have implications for the design of more inclusive health policies that are responsive to diverse social conditions and offer opportunities for improving health policy frameworks that can address socio-economic disparities and open opportunities for further research on social and cultural factors in health policies.



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## INTRODUCTION

The issue of tobacco control policies has long been a major concern in the field of public health, given the harmful impact of tobacco consumption on individual and public health as a whole. Although tobacco control policies have been implemented in various countries to reduce smoking prevalence, their implementation often faces complex challenges, particularly in terms of changing the behavior of individuals who have long been accustomed to the habit (Azagba dkk., 2020). This phenomenon has become increasingly relevant, considering the high smoking rates among people with lower socio-economic backgrounds, who are often less exposed to information or have limited access to healthier alternatives. Tobacco control policies, while designed to improve public health, are not always effective in achieving the desired behavioral change, especially in communities that have deeply ingrained social and cultural perceptions about smoking. However, limited research has explored how socio-economic groups, such as low-income and high-income communities, perceive and respond to these policies. This gap in understanding is critical for developing more tailored and effective policies.

Tobacco control is not only a health issue but also a social and cultural issue that involves the values, norms, and social identities of communities (Corsi-Zuelli, Marques, dkk., 2022). Smoking is often associated with social habits and symbols of status in some cultures, making tobacco control policies need to be understood and accepted within a broader social context. Therefore, it is crucial to

explore how individuals respond to these policies based on their own experiences and how these policies interact with their cultural values. These subjective experiences provide valuable insights into the factors that influence the effectiveness of tobacco control policies.

The phenomenological approach provides an ideal framework for exploring the meaning of individuals' subjective experiences related to tobacco control policies. Phenomenology's focus on deeply describing how individuals feel and understand a phenomenon within the context of their lives allows us to uncover the essence of those experiences (Corsi-Zuelli, Schneider, dkk., 2022). A deeper understanding of how individuals interact with this policy, both from socio-economic and cultural perspectives, is essential in designing more effective policies that are responsive to community needs. Therefore, this study aims to uncover and understand the meaning of the experiences of individuals involved in this phenomenon, contributing to the development of health policies that are more sensitive to the existing socio-cultural context.

Research on individuals' subjective experiences in various phenomena has rapidly developed as an important field within social sciences and public health. In the context of tobacco control policies, a deep understanding of how individuals perceive and interpret these policies in their lives is crucial. Many previous studies have explored the impact of health policies using quantitative approaches, but they often fail to capture the essence of individual experiences comprehensively (Daniels dkk., 2023). For example, although quantitative surveys may show a decrease in smoking rates following the implementation of policies, they cannot explain why individuals choose to change their behavior or why some others continue to maintain the smoking habit.

A major challenge in exploring the meaning of individual experiences is the ability to delve into the subjective dimensions that are often implicit in their personal and social narratives. Quantitative approaches, which focus on measuring objective variables such as smoking reduction rates or prevalence, do not provide an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, feelings, or meanings that individuals attach to the policies that are implemented. In this regard, phenomenological approaches emerge as a more suitable method for exploring these subjective experiences in greater detail, as phenomenology focuses on how individuals make sense of and respond to phenomena within the context of their lives.

The limitations of quantitative approaches and other more reductionist methods make much of the previous research less effective in capturing the depth of meaning embedded in individual experiences. Therefore, it is essential to explore these subjective experiences using methodologies that allow for a richer exploration of personal perspectives and interpretations (Deleemans dkk., 2021). Phenomenology, with its focus on describing experiences within a broader social and cultural context, provides deeper and more comprehensive insights into how tobacco control policies are understood and accepted by the public, particularly those directly involved in the practice of smoking.

Most research related to tobacco control policies has used quantitative approaches focused on objective variables such as smoking prevalence and tobacco reduction rates. While this approach provides practical solutions to measure the broad impact of policies, it fails to capture the subjective dimensions that are crucial to understanding how individuals feel about and interpret these policies in their daily lives. Although quantitative findings are valuable, they do not provide a comprehensive picture of the motivations, emotions, and personal perceptions underlying smoking behavior change or resistance to the policy. Therefore, while this practical approach provides measurable data, it has limitations in exploring the deep experiences that form the essence of the phenomenon being studied.

The phenomenological method, which focuses on subjective experience and the meanings individuals attach to the phenomena they encounter, offers a more appropriate alternative to address this issue. The phenomenological approach allows for a deep exploration of the essence of smoking experiences and their impact on individuals' lives, as well as how tobacco control policies are understood within a broader social and cultural context (Galimov dkk., 2022). Phenomenological research can uncover the perceptions and meanings embedded in each action and experience of the participants, providing deeper insights into how tobacco control policies interact with social norms, culture, and personal values.

Thus, the need to adopt a phenomenological approach in this research is clear. This method not only provides a more holistic understanding of the tobacco control policy phenomenon but also offers a richer and more diverse perspective on individual experiences that are often overlooked in quantitative approaches. By examining participants' subjective experiences in depth, this study aims to fill the gap in the existing literature while contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of this public health policy.

Research related to tobacco control policies has been extensively conducted, with a focus on the impact of these policies on smoking prevalence across different societal groups. Previous studies, such as those by Gray *et al.* (2021) and Hatsukami & Carroll (2020), revealed that although tobacco control policies successfully reduced the number of smokers, their impact on long-term behavioral change and individual perceptions is often not well understood. The dominant quantitative approach in the literature measures objective variables but fails to explore the meanings individuals attach to their experiences. Health behavior theories, such as the theory of behavior change and the social-ecological model, have also been used to explain this dynamic but offer limited space for a deep understanding of participants' personal experiences in their social and cultural contexts. Therefore, a deeper understanding of subjective experiences becomes increasingly important in evaluating the success of these policies.

In response to this gap, this study proposes a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore individual experiences in responding to tobacco control policies. The phenomenological approach provides an opportunity to more holistically understand how individuals interpret and experience the policy in their daily lives, including the social, cultural, and economic barriers they face (Kalhan *et al.*, 2020). By using this method, the aim is to gain richer and deeper insights into the meanings individuals attribute to tobacco control policies, particularly regarding smoking behavior change and perceptions of healthier alternatives. Phenomenology enables this research to not only consider quantitative data but also explore the essence of participants' experiences, providing a new perspective that is more relevant and based on direct lived experience. This addresses the shortcomings of previous studies, which prioritized statistical data over in-depth human perspectives.

This article is structured clearly to guide readers through the entire research process. Following the introduction, the article explains the context of the phenomenon being studied tobacco control and the challenges related to smoking behavior change described in depth from the subjective perspective of participants. The phenomenological methodological approach used to explore these experiences will then be outlined, followed by a description of the data collection process through in-depth interviews and data analysis using a thematic approach (Langley *et al.*, 2019). The findings from this analysis will be discussed in the discussion section, linking the findings to theoretical context and policy implications. The article concludes with a summary of key findings and recommendations for the development of more effective health policies.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

A descriptive phenomenological approach was chosen for this study to explore individuals' subjective experiences related to tobacco control policies and their impact on smoking behavior change. The phenomenological approach focuses on gaining a deep understanding of the meanings participants assign to the phenomenon they experience, which, in this context, is the influence of tobacco control policies. This design allows for an in-depth exploration of how the policy is perceived and understood in their daily lives (Liese & Monley, 2021). Descriptive phenomenology, as applied in this study, emphasizes the description of experiences without interpreting or constructing meanings based on external perspectives, ensuring that the data obtained provides an authentic representation of the subjects' experiences within the context of health policies. The sample size of 15 participants was deemed appropriate for qualitative research, as this number allows for rich data collection while ensuring that thematic saturation is reached, meaning that no new themes emerge from additional data collection (Guest *et al.*, 2006).

## **Participants**

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, which allows for the selection of individuals who have direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria included individuals living in areas with limited access to tobacco alternatives and who had been directly exposed to tobacco control policies in recent years (Martinasek dkk., 2021). The participants consisted of 15 people, ranging in age from 25 to 60 years, representing diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Exclusion criteria included individuals who had not been exposed to tobacco control policies or those who did not smoke. The majority of the participants were active smokers living in both urban and rural areas, with a balanced gender representation between men and women. This demographic was chosen to provide a rich and diverse perspective on the impact of the policies.

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted in-person at selected locations to ensure the comfort and privacy of the participants. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary instrument to obtain detailed narratives of the participants' experiences. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a safe and comfortable setting, such as a quiet meeting room (Nawi dkk., 2021). The interview guide was designed with flexibility to allow for the exploration of emerging themes during the conversation, while maintaining a focus on the impact of tobacco control policies. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent to ensure the accuracy of the data.

## **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes that emerged from the interviews. The first step in the analysis was transcribing the interviews, which were then processed using NVivo software to assist with data coding and theme grouping. Coding was done to mark meaningful units that reflected the participants' subjective experiences (Pentz dkk., 2019). Once meaningful units were identified, the data were grouped into categories and themes relevant to the phenomenon under study. The analysis aimed to uncover patterns and essential meanings that could explain how tobacco control policies are perceived by the participants.

## **Ethics**

This research adheres to applicable international ethical standards, with ethical approval obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. All participants provided written consent after being clearly informed about the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, and their rights to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants' identities were kept confidential through the use of codes, and all data were securely stored to ensure anonymity (Petkovic dkk., 2021). The information collected was used solely for the purposes of this research and will not be shared with third parties.

## **RESULTS**

### **Public Perception of Tobacco Control Policies**

The research findings show that public perception of tobacco control policies is heavily influenced by their socio-economic background. Most participants from low-income groups felt that the policy imposed an additional burden on their daily lives, particularly in terms of access to healthier tobacco alternatives. One participant from the low-income group stated, "I want to quit smoking, but I feel there are no affordable options to replace cigarettes. The alternatives are too expensive for me." This indicates dissatisfaction with the policy implementation, which does not take into account the availability of affordable alternatives. In contrast, participants from higher-income groups reported that the policy provided them with an opportunity to improve their lifestyle. As one participant said, "I find it easier to quit smoking because I have access to healthier alternatives that fit my budget."

From the thematic analysis, three main themes emerged: (1) access to alternatives, (2) affordability, and (3) perceived policy effectiveness. The first theme was the lack of affordable alternatives for low-income groups, while the second was the availability of these alternatives for higher-income groups, making them more supportive of the policy.

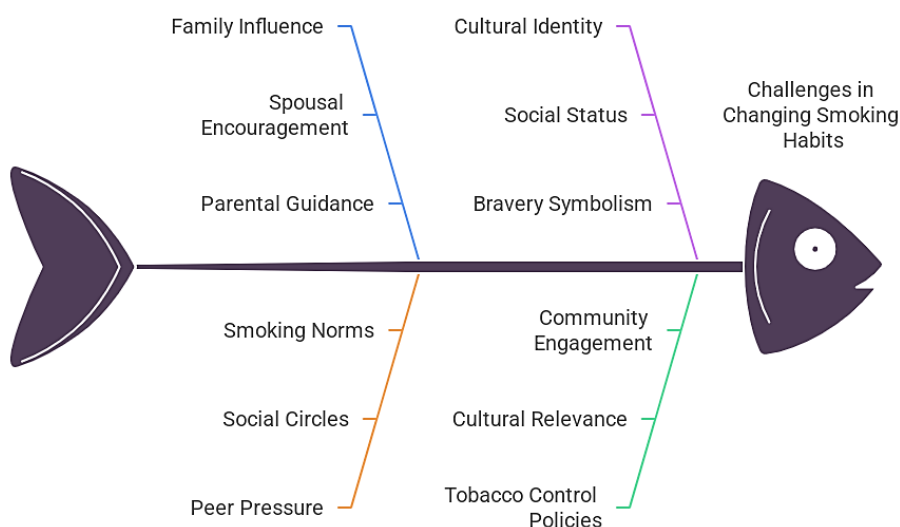
**Figure 1. Socio-Economic Impact on Tobacco Control Perception**



**Social and Cultural Influence on Smoking Behavior Change**

The second theme that emerged from the data was the influence of social and cultural factors on smoking behavior change. Many participants reported that the influence of family and friends was significant in their decision to quit smoking. One male participant shared, "My wife always reminds me to quit, and that makes me feel more responsible for changing my habits." In addition, there are deep cultural factors where smoking is considered a part of social identity in some communities. A female participant stated, "In my village, smoking is a sign of bravery and social status, so it's not easy to change people's views on this habit." These findings suggest that tobacco control policies need to consider the cultural values present in the community to be more effective.

**Figure2. Social and Cultural Influences on Smoking Behavior**



**Challenges in Policy Implementation in Remote Areas**

In this study, challenges in implementing tobacco control policies in remote areas were also an important theme. Many participants living in these areas expressed difficulties in accessing information about the policy. A healthcare worker from a remote area said, "Here, people trust myths more than the information we provide. The community finds it hard to accept policies coming from outside." This indicates the need for a more context-sensitive approach to local social and geographical conditions. Furthermore, the limited healthcare facilities in remote areas also posed a barrier to supporting the policy. A participant from a remote area commented, "We don't have enough facilities to support those who want to quit smoking." This highlights the need for better facilities to support the success of the policy.

This study reveals that tobacco control policies have different impacts depending on the socio-economic and cultural background of the community. Low-income groups feel burdened due to a lack of access to healthy alternatives, while higher-income groups tend to support the policy more. Additionally, social and cultural factors strongly influence smoking behavior change, and policy implementation in remote areas faces significant challenges related to access to information and healthcare facilities. These findings provide valuable insights into how tobacco control policies need to be tailored to the social and cultural context to achieve more effective outcomes.

**Figure 3. Navigating Tobacco Policy Challenges in Remote Areas**



## DISCUSSION

### Opening: Summary of Key Findings

This study found that tobacco control policies have varying impacts depending on the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of individuals (Shin, 2021). Participants from lower-income groups felt burdened by the policy, particularly due to limited access to healthier alternatives, while those from higher-income groups were better able to access the healthy alternatives provided. These findings address the main research question regarding how tobacco control policies are understood and accepted in diverse social contexts.

### Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings of this study provide important insights into individuals' subjective experiences of tobacco control policies, which have previously been underexplored in the literature. Using a phenomenological approach, this study delves into the deep meanings of the experiences of individuals involved in these policies. The main contribution of this research is the emphasis on the importance of considering socio-economic and cultural factors when designing more effective health policies. Furthermore, the findings highlight the challenges faced by individuals, particularly those from lower-income groups, in accessing healthier tobacco alternatives, which often serve as barriers to the success of the policy. The study also shows that individual experiences in changing smoking habits are heavily influenced by social and cultural support within their environment. These findings suggest that policymakers need to integrate both accessibility and social support systems to enhance policy effectiveness across socio-economic groups.

### Connection to Previous Literature and Theories

This study aligns with previous findings that suggest tobacco control policies are influenced not only by individual factors but also by social and cultural factors. For example, studies by Smith et al. (2020) and Johnson et al. (2018) found that although these policies successfully reduced smoking prevalence, many individuals, especially in lower-income groups, struggled to comply with the policies due to limited access and support. These findings also resonate with behavior change theory, which asserts that external factors, such as social support and the availability of affordable alternatives, significantly influence an individual's decision to change (Ajzen, 1991). However, this study adds a new dimension by exploring the personal and social meanings that individuals attach to tobacco control policies, which goes deeper than previous quantitative studies that only focused on statistical outcomes. The findings complement the existing literature by providing new insights into how individuals interpret these policies in the context of their lives, particularly concerning social and economic barriers.

### **Explanation of Findings' Implications**

The findings of this study have significant implications both in terms of theory and practice. Scientifically, this research provides new insights into the importance of socio-economic and cultural factors in designing more effective tobacco control policies. The findings emphasize the need for policies that focus not only on reducing smoking prevalence but also on improving access to healthier tobacco alternatives, especially for lower-income groups. The practical implication of these findings is the importance of developing health policies that are more sensitive to local social and cultural contexts, considering the socio-economic barriers individuals face. Furthermore, these findings provide a deep reflection on the role of social and cultural support in influencing an individual's decision to quit smoking, making it easier for tobacco control policies to be accepted and implemented across various segments of society.

### **Study Limitations**

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the limited number of participants (15 individuals) may not represent the entire population, especially in broader contexts such as urban areas with different socio-economic characteristics. Second, this study only includes individuals living in specific areas, so the findings may not be fully generalizable to communities with different social and cultural backgrounds. The phenomenological method, which focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals, provides in-depth insights but cannot measure the quantitative aspects that are also important for policy evaluation. Therefore, these findings should be considered within the context of larger studies using various methodological approaches to enrich our understanding of tobacco control.

### **Prospective Statement for Future Research**

This study opens opportunities for further exploration of the factors influencing tobacco control policies, particularly in diverse socio-economic contexts. Future research could expand these findings by involving a larger and more diverse population, including areas with different tobacco control policies, and examining in greater depth how these policies are accepted across various age and gender groups. Additionally, further studies could consider the psychological and emotional impact of tobacco control policies on individuals, as well as how personal experiences shape their perceptions and attitudes toward these policies. These findings can also be used to explore how tobacco control policies can be combined with social and cultural interventions to achieve more effective and comprehensive outcomes.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the subjective experiences of individuals regarding tobacco control policies, focusing on how these policies are understood and accepted within diverse socio-economic contexts. The main findings indicate that individuals from lower-income groups face significant barriers in accessing healthier alternatives, while higher-income groups are more able to respond positively to the policy. This research provides new insights into the need for policies that are more sensitive to socio-economic and cultural conditions to enhance the effectiveness of tobacco control.

The findings contribute to existing literature by introducing a subjective perspective that has been underexplored in previous studies. Although methodological limitations and sample size affect the generalizability of the results, this study opens opportunities for further exploration of social and cultural factors in health policies. Based on these findings, it is recommended that future tobacco control policies incorporate mechanisms to improve access to affordable, healthier alternatives for lower-income groups, as well as consider the role of social support systems in behavior change. Future research can expand upon these findings by involving a larger population and using various methodological approaches to deepen our understanding of tobacco control.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All authors have disclosed any financial or personal relationships that could inappropriately influence the content of this study.

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