Smoking scenes in popular Japanese serial television dramas: descriptive analysis during the same 3-month period in two consecutive years

HIDEYUKI KANDA1, TOMONORI OKAMURA2, TANVIR CHOWDHURY TURIN2, TAKEHITO HAYAKAWA3, TAKASHI KADOWAKI2 and HIROTSUGU UESHIMA2

1 Department of Hygiene and Preventive Medicine, Fukushima Medical University, Fukushima, Japan, 2 Department of Health Science, Shiga University of Medical Science, Otsu, Japan and 3 Department of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, Shimane University, Izumo, Japan

SUMMARY

Japanese serial television dramas are becoming very popular overseas, particularly in other Asian countries. Exposure to smoking scenes in movies and television dramas has been known to trigger initiation of habitual smoking in young people. Smoking scenes in Japanese dramas may affect the smoking behavior of many young Asians. We examined smoking scenes and smoking-related items in serial television dramas targeting young audiences in Japan during the same season in two consecutive years. Fourteen television dramas targeting the young audience broadcast between July and September in 2001 and 2002 were analyzed. A total of 136 h 42 min of television programs were divided into unit scenes of 3 min (a total of 2734 unit scenes). All the unit scenes were reviewed for smoking scenes and smoking-related items. Of the 2734 3-min unit scenes, 205 (7.5%) were actual smoking scenes and 387 (14.2%) depicted smoking environments with the presence of smoking-related items, such as ashtrays. In 185 unit scenes (90.2% of total smoking scenes), actors were shown smoking. Actresses were less frequently shown smoking (9.8% of total smoking scenes). Smoking characters in dramas were in the 20–49 age group in 193 unit scenes (94.1% of total smoking scenes). In 96 unit scenes (46.8% of total smoking scenes), at least one non-smoker was present in the smoking scenes. The smoking locations were mainly indoors, including offices, restaurants and homes (122 unit scenes, 59.6%). The most common smoking-related items shown were ashtrays (in 45.5% of smoking-item-related scenes) and cigarettes (in 30.2% of smoking-item-related scenes). Only 3 unit scenes (0.1% of all scenes) promoted smoking prohibition.

This was a descriptive study to examine the nature of smoking scenes observed in Japanese television dramas from a public health perspective.

Key words: smoking scenes; Japanese serial television dramas; descriptive analysis; unit scenes

INTRODUCTION

In Japan, the smoking rate is much higher for men (48.3%) than in other developed countries, but it is lower for women (13.6%) (Statistics and Information Department. Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2003). However, the smoking rate for women aged 20–39 years is increasing. In fact, it has recently become almost the same in this age group as in Western countries. Although Japanese law forbids smoking for those under 20 years old, teen smoking is frequently observed (Osaki et al., 2003). Thus, it is important to examine the social factors that promote smoking behavior.

Japanese serial television dramas are becoming very popular overseas, particularly in other Asian countries (Stronach, 1989; Ishii et al., 2001;
Ng Wai-ming, 2001). East Asian nations, mainly Taiwan and Hong Kong, are major distribution areas (Ishii et al., 2001). Southeast Asian nations, particularly Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, have witnessed a boom in Japanese dramas in recent years (Ng Wai-ming, 2001). Japanese television dramas inform Asians about contemporary Japanese society and culture. They have successfully cultivated the image of Japan among young people.

Television and other media represent one of the most important and underrecognized influences on adolescents’ health and behavior (Terre et al., 1991; Strasburger and Donnerstein, 1999). Smoking is used as a means of image expression of actors and actresses appearing in movies (Shields et al., 1999). Exposure to smoking scenes in movies has been known to trigger initiation of habitual smoking in young people (Dalton et al., 2003). Smoking scenes in Japanese dramas may affect the behavior of young viewers, in Japan and other Asian countries.

There are global trends to ban smoking in movies and TV based on the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) (Taylor et al., 2000). In 2003, the WHO World No Tobacco Day theme was ‘Tobacco Free Film/Tobacco Free Fashion’, that WHO calls on the entertainment industry, in particular the world of films and fashion, to stop promoting tobacco [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2003]. We have the anti-tobacco movements in the film industry that reduce the impact of adolescent exposure to smoking. ‘Smoke Free Movies (SFM)’, whose policy goals are endorsed by WHO, American Heart Association, etc., is an initiative of San Francisco’s Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education (Woloshin and Schwartz, 2002). Bollywood in India is actively considering banning smoking in films and TV serials (Mudur, 2005). However, in Japan, there have been few studies to analyze the contents of smoking scenes in movies or television dramas. Although some previous studies have reported frequencies or contents of smoking acts in Japanese dramas targeting young audiences (Sone and Fujisaki, 1998; Sone, 1999; Kanda et al., 2003), most of them provided no information about the setting where smoking occurs in dramas.

The extent to which young people are routinely exposed to smoking scenes in Japanese television programs should be further investigated. The present study examines smoking scenes and smoking-related items shown in serial television dramas targeting young audiences in Japan during the same season in two consecutive years.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Distribution of television programs in Japan**

Seven hundred television sets are available for every one thousand people in Japan (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 1999), which means that many households have more than one television. The number of television drama viewers is greater by far than the number of movie viewers. Five major commercial broadcast stations (Fuji Television Network, Nippon Television Network, Tokyo Broadcasting System, TV Asahi Corp. and Television Tokyo Channel 12, Ltd) make and distribute most of the television dramas to 133 local broadcast stations. A local commercial broadcast station belongs to one of the five major commercial networks in Japan. TV programs produced by a major commercial network are distributed by the local stations. There is no legal regulation of smoking scenes in these television programs, although the tobacco industry started self-regulations, such as the elimination of tobacco advertising on TV and radio and the cancellation of tobacco advertising in movie theaters, outdoor televisions and the Internet since 1998.

A Japanese serial television drama produces almost 12 episodes in 3 months. Most television programs are broadcast on air at the same time throughout Japan.

**Materials**

The materials were selected from 14 first-run popular serial television dramas with target audiences from teenage to 40 years old, with 1-h episodes broadcast by one of the five major commercial broadcasters in the evening time slot. We chose the same broadcast period from July to September in both 2001 and 2002 to avoid seasonal variations in broadcasting. The episodes were selected by either of the following criteria: (i) a popular slot—starting at 9 p.m. on Monday, Saturday and Sunday, and at 10 p.m. on other days of the week or (ii) spin-off dramas of an original program registering a television viewer rate in excess of 20% (Nikkei
Entertainment editors, 2001). Thirteen dramas met the first criterion and one drama met the second criterion. Each program was recorded on videotape by 16 well-trained observers and was used for the analysis. Each average audience rating was estimated to be from 8.2 to 20.3% of all households with televisions in Japan (TV LIFE editors, 2001, 2002).

Analyses

Serial scenes from each drama were divided into 3-min intervals and each was counted as a single ‘unit scene’. If this 3-min interval contained a smoking-related scene, it was counted as a single ‘unit smoking scene’ (Shields et al., 1999; Escamilla et al., 2000). If a smoking-related scene exceeded the division interval boundary and continued to the next ‘unit scene’ then it was counted as a separate ‘unit smoking scene’.

Smoking-related scenes were divided into scenes containing ‘smoking’ and ‘displays of smoking-related items’ (e.g. matches, ashtrays). We recorded the characteristics of the smoker (gender, age group) and the depiction of the situation and location, and the situation of the smoking act. ‘Display of smoking-related items’ was defined as the presence of cigarettes or other smoking paraphernalia (e.g. cigarettes, matches, ashtrays, packaging, logo) and environmental messages, including tobacco advertising without the smoking act itself. We also counted the numbers of messages against smoking (i.e. negative consequences of smoking behaviors and smoking-related items).

RESULTS

Of 14 dramas, 12 contained at least 1 unit ‘smoking’ scene (85.7% of all dramas) and 13 contained at least 1 unit ‘display of smoking-related items’ scene (92.9% of all dramas).

Table 1 summarizes the depiction of smoking acts and smoking-related items displayed in Japanese dramas. A total of 136 h 42 min of 14 television programs were divided into 2734 unit scenes of 3 min each. Of the 2734 unit scenes, 205 (7.5% of total unit scenes) were ‘smoking’ and 387 (14.2% of all unit scenes) were ‘display of smoking-related items’ scenes. The most common smoking-related items were ashtrays (45.5% of smoking-related items) and cigarettes (30.2%).

Table 2 presents the characteristics of smokers and the settings where smoking was depicted in Japanese dramas. Actors were observed smoking in 185 unit scenes (90.2% of total smoking scenes). Actresses were observed smoking less frequently (20 unit scenes, 9.8%). Characters in the 20–49 year age group were smoking in 193 unit scenes (94.1% of total smoking scenes). Many scenes showed smoking acts in the presence of non-smokers (96 unit scenes, 46.8%) as well as smoking alone (100 unit scenes, 48.8%). Smoking was mainly seen in indoor settings, including offices, restaurants and homes (122 unit scenes, 59.6%). Especially, they were also frequently observed in restaurants and bars (44 unit scenes, 21.5%), as well as in offices (51 unit scenes, 24.9%).

Smoking settings were in the following order: in the office while working (51 unit scenes, 24.9%), during the beginning or ending credits
DISCUSSION

Smoking scenes in Japanese serial television dramas

Various popular Japanese dramas have successfully promoted the spread of Japanese culture throughout the world, especially in Asia (Ishii et al., 2001; Ng Wai-ming, 2001). The behavior of youth is easily influenced by media, such as TV, movies or magazines (Strasburger and Donnerstein, 1999). If harmful scenes are included in these media, negative effects may spread not only in Japan but also to other counties where these dramas are broadcast.

This is a preliminary study to examine the nature of smoking scenes observed in Japanese television dramas from a public health perspective. In our findings, most of the smoking acts were depictions of characters aged 20–49 years smoking alone. Most smoking scenes do not relate to the storyline of the drama, especially in office situations or during the beginning or ending credits. Furthermore, Japanese dramas had very few negative messages regarding smoking. Such smoking scenes may promote smoking in young viewers, especially with the absence of any verbal message about the harm and negative effects of smoking.

Smoking scenes may counteract smoking prevention messages directed towards children. A previous study reported that smoking actors and actresses may encourage young people to start smoking (Dalton et al., 2003). Because there is no legal regulation for smoking scenes in Japanese television dramas, exposure to such scenes may be a triggering factor in habitual smoking for the Japanese youths and for young people in other countries where these dramas are broadcast. There are also other triggers such as socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. school, age, sex, parents’ education), social influences (parent smoking, sibling smoking, friend smoking, receptivity to tobacco promotions) and other characteristics of child and family (e.g. self-reported school performance, rebelliousness, self-esteem) (Sargent et al., 2001). A ban on smoking scenes in Japanese dramas is needed because the mass media has a strong effect on individual behavior.

Smoking was seen mainly in indoor settings, especially in offices, restaurants or bars. It seems that television program producers have not recognized, or have ignored, the world trend of prohibiting smoking activities in public places, especially in restaurants. Recently, restrictions on smoking have also been imposed on bars [Kiser and Boschert, 2001; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2004]. The Irish

(45 unit scenes, 22.0%), while eating (44 unit scenes, 21.5%).

There were only 3 unit scenes that promoted smoking prohibition (not shown in table). Two unit scenes included ‘NO SMOKING’ signs on the wall. Another was a scene with a leading actor throwing away a pack of cigarettes when he was jilted by his sweetheart and decided to quit smoking.

DISCUSSION

We found that most serial television drama programs targeting young audiences in Japan included smoking scenes. Smoking scenes occupied 7.5% of all 3-min units, and smoking-related items were included in 14.2% of all 3-min units.
government implemented a law banning smoking in a workplace (McElvaney, 2004). The Italian government banned smoking indoors and in public areas (Dobson, 2005). In Asia, Hong Kong started a smoking ban at workplaces, bars and restaurants (Editors in People’s Daily, 2004). Approximately half of smoking behavior in the scenes was in the presence of non-smokers. Furthermore, most smoking behaviors were during work or while eating. These smoking scenes are not appropriate for public anti-smoking education because they do not depict the dangers of passive smoking and poor manners. There is no law to ban smoking for adults in Japan. But, we have a law to let them try so that building administrators prevent passive smoking, the ‘Health Promotion Law’ passed in 2003.

A previous study of smoking and smoking-related scenes in Hollywood films reported that smoking acts were present in 28.4% of all scenes and displays of smoking-related items were present in 55.1%, measured in 5-min intervals (Escamilla et al., 2000). The difference between our results and that from Hollywood movies might be due to the national broadcasting policy, the business policy between production offices, the length of screen time, total running periods and the social norms for smoking, such as gender differences between different ethnicities.

We adopted a method that is widely used internationally by dividing each program into equally timed intervals (Shields et al., 1999; Escamilla et al., 2000). We defined 1 unit into 3-min intervals because the length of one-episode television dramas (usually 60 min) is different than that of movies (usually at least 90 min).

Previous studies in Japan have made timing measurements or counted the number of smoking acts in Japanese dramas (Sone and Fujisaki, 1998; Sone, 1999). In these previous studies of Japanese television dramas, it was reported that smoking scenes occupied 3.3% of the total time period, timed by stopwatches (Sone, 1999). The above-mentioned studies reported that the frequency and duration of tobacco-related actions were measured in five randomly selected 1-h television dramas broadcast in Japan in 1995 and 1996. It is possible that the timing measurement accurately reflects the numbers of the smoking scene. Counting the number of smoking acts is a simple method; however, this method has disadvantages because it provides no information about the settings where smoking occurred in these scenes. The strength our study appears to have over the other is that we coded the settings where smoking occurred, not just the frequency of smoking and the characteristics of smokers. Accordingly, we divided each episode into 3-min intervals, which could simultaneously evaluate the proportion of smoking scenes and the background situation in the smoking scenes.

There are some limitations in the present study. First, our study is an ecological design that does not prove any causal relationship between smoking scenes and actual smoking behaviors of Japanese or Asian people. It will be necessary to carry out research to clarify how people who watch actual smoking scenes in Japanese dramas are affected. Finally, we studied these dramas only during the summer season; however, we believe that it is easy for teenagers to watch these dramas during the summer school break because Japanese do not have the habit of long-term travel and vacation in the summer.

In conclusion, we clarified that when we divide Japanese serial television drama scenes into 3-min intervals, determined the proportions of intervals that included smoking-related scenes, 7.5% included smoking scenes and 14.2% included the display of smoking-related items. In general, smoking was not part of the storyline of the television dramas. There were few scenes that promoted smoking prohibition. A consensus should be reached to encourage Japanese dramas to present a message of smoking prevention because the mass media has a strong effect on individual decision-making.

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Address for correspondence:
Hideyuki Kanda
Department of Hygiene and Preventive Medicine
Fukushima Medical University
1 Hikarigaoka
Fukushima
960-1295
Japan
E-mail: hkanda@fmu.ac.jp
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